What-If?

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What-If?

by KingCrimson

Summary

Reposted by popular demand.

Notes

I won't be continuing the fic, but people have asked me to post it again, so here it is. As a reminder, my tumblr is here: http://king--crimson.tumblr.com/ . If you have any questions, you have a good chance of getting them answered there.

"We're here"

A large, well maintained building stands before you. However, for you, it's not a nice sight at all.

This is the school you will spend the next six years in, away from home, and your father.

Your father. You never really got along well with him, as he was always absorbed in his research, sparing little time for you. You were raised by a myriad of babysitters, even though your dad was always home. Come to think of it, you hardly know him. Despite all that, right now, you don't want to let go of his hand.

"I don't want to! I wanna go home!" Your voice is shaking, and your eyes are filling with tears.

Your father, however, only gives you an empty look.

The headmaster of the school, an elderly woman, accompanied by a couple of teachers, are waiting at the building's entrance.

"Welcome! You must be Matoi Isshin and Ryuuko, correct? We have been expecting you."

They look like nice people, but they're still strangers. You tighten your grip on your dad's hand.

"That's right. I trust I'm leaving Ryuuko in capable hands.", he says.

"Are you really sure about this, Mr. Matoi? Your daughter seems terrified", the headmaster replies, clearly worried.

"She'll be fine."

Having heard that, you can no longer control yourself. You start bawling loudly, tears streaming down your face, onto your clothes.

"Why, dad?! I wanna stay home! Why are you leaving me here?!"

He turns to you, and places a hand on your shoulder.

"To keep you safe.", he says, silently enough only for you to hear.

The answer surprises you, and you stop crying. Keep you safe from what? What place could possibly be safer than your own home?

He lets go of your shoulder, and turns to leave. The headmaster approaches you.

"Now, now, there's no reason to be sad, Ryuuko. I'm sure your dad will come to visit you once in a while."

Her warm tone and kind words calm you down a bit. She quickly produces a paper tissue from her handbag, and gives it to you.

You wipe your face, and blow your nose. You call out to your father.

"It's true, right? You'll come visit?"

But Matoi Isshin says nothing, and continues to walk away.

He never did come.

Your first few months in elementary school would later go on to be one of your most repressed memories.

The other kids, while at first indifferent towards you, quickly started making fun of you, when a rumor that you're an orphan spread. You tried to deny it, but had no way of proving otherwise, as your father cut off all contact.

They didn't stop at that, either. Your red streak of hair, and unusual eyes, both of which you've had since you can remember, became an object of ridicule, as well.

The teachers tried to help you all they could, but you've quickly learned that the teasing only stops for as long as a teacher is nearby, and returns with increased force afterwards. Eventually, you stopped seeking their aid.

Some nights, you would cry your eyes out, wishing to return home. Over time, though, you started to question if your father ever really loved you, and if that parting line about keeping you safe wasn't just something he made up to keep you quiet.

It's a day like any other, you're sitting on a bench outside, alone, eating breakfast. The other kids sit in groups, and occasionally glance at you. You pay them no mind. You're already used to this.

"If it isn't Matoi!"

You look up, facing the direction of the voice. In front of you stands a group of bullies you're already familiar with. While they don't shy away from bothering other kids, they seem to have taken a particular liking in picking on you.

"What do you think you're doing, sitting on our bench?", their leader says with a cocky smile, approaching you.

"I don't see your name on it anywhere.", you reply, unfazed by his taunts.

"Maybe not, but if I say it's mine, then it's mine! Are you going to run and cry to a teacher, or maybe your parents? Oh, that's right! You don't have parents!", he says, and the group starts laughing.

You've heard this "joke" at least a million times now. There was a time when it brought you to tears, but you've grown tired of that. You choose to simply ignore him, and continue eating.

"Don't you ignore me! I told you, this bench is mine, so get lost!", he shouts angrily, and grabs you by the collar.

You look down at your shirt. It now has a sizable rip, abruptly stopping at a single, red, now glowing thread. This is not just any shirt. It's one of the few gifts your father has personally given you. You've always liked to wear it. And now, it's ruined.

You tried your best to remain stoic, but this is not something you can forgive. Tears start flowing freely down your face. You shake yourself free of the boy's grip. He steps back in surprise, but his cocky smile returns after a moment.

"Ooh, did I make you mad? I made that ugly shirt of yours a little prettier, you should be happy!"

His taunts bring you to a boiling point. In desperation, you clench your fist and take a swing at him. You know you'll regret it, but you simply cannot control your emotions.

But the result is entirely different than you expected.

Your fist connects with his face, and the sheer force of the blow knocks him onto the ground. His buddies let out gasps of surprise, and take a step back. You can't believe what happened, either. Where did this strength come from?

"W-what? How did this h-happen?", the leader chokes out as he struggles to get up, barely holding back tears.

"I'll get back at you for this, M-Matoi! Let's go guys!", he calls out to his friends, only to discover that they've already gotten away. Stripped of his last shreds of confidence, he runs away crying hysterically.

You stand there, staring blankly for a moment. You examine your still-clenched fist. It doesn't look any different than before, how did you suddenly get so strong?

Eventually, you smile. Turns out, scaring bullies away works better than ignoring them, and you have the power to do so, something you never realized before.

You take a look at your beloved shirt, to assess the damage. However, to your surprise, you find that it's completely untouched!

The next three years pass you by pretty fast.

Ever since you managed to scare those bullies away, you had decided to make sure you'd always be able to stand up for yourself in the future. You really got into sports, trying a bit of everything, in an effort to strengthen your body.

Eventually, you've found a discipline that especially suits you: kendo. Although it's an unusual sport for an elementary schooler, let alone a girl, to practice, the PE teacher eventually gave in to your pleas, and promised to arrange a course for you.

For two and a half a years, you honed your skills, practicing with older opponents. The kendo lessons quickly became one of the few things you look forward to. In the dojo, nobody judges you for who you are, only your skills matter. And your skills increased very quickly, as you've reached first kyu at the age of 8, something you were told is impossible. Guess you do have a knack for this.

While your newfound interest did not make you any friends, considering the lessons are held quite far away from school, it did serve well to prevent teasing. The training regimen has sharpened your reflexes and coordination, and as a result, the bullies have quickly learned not to mess with you.

"Okay, that's it for today, remember to put all the gear back where it belongs.", the instructor calls out. You set your shinai down, bow to your sparring partner, and head for the changing room. The training's been tough, as usual, but you've grown to enjoy it.

You arrive at the school, and head towards the dorms. In front of it, you see the headmaster, seemingly waiting for you.

"Good evening, Ryuuko, did your training go well?", she asks, smiling at you.

"U-uh, yes, thank you.", you stutter, somewhat embarrassed. "Is something the matter, ma'am?" Did you get in some trouble?

She smiles again. "I'm sure you're aware of the upcoming sports day, which we are co-organizing with a school in Kanto, correct?" You nod quietly. Kanto is the region where Tokyo is, as well as your home. Your father sent you to a school in Kyushu, far to the east, as if in attempt to keep you away.

"Well, today, their headmaster called me, and relayed some interesting information to me. As it turns out, they also have a young, extraordinarily talented kendoka, just like you." You raise your head towards her. "And so, I have a question to you, Ryuuko. Would you agree to have a show fight with that person during the sports day? You don't have to if you don't want to, but I think would be a great way for you to show off the results of your hard work."

You give the offer some thought. You enjoy the trainings, but you've been itching for a real match, to put all the hard-earned skills to a test. This is the perfect opportunity for that, but then there's another thing to consider.

Will you be able to handle the pressure of having to fight in front of so many people? You get nervous whenever asked to read something aloud in class, and this is on a whole different level. However, this is something you're good at. You've achieved a rank you shouldn't be able to reach in several more years. You can do it.

You straighten your posture, and look the headmaster in the eyes. "I'll do it."

The day finally comes. You've been training twice as hard since accepting the offer, and you feel ready.

During the several hours of travel, you start wondering what your opponent will be like. You were told that they're a year older than you, but nothing more than that. Will it be a girl? A boy? Either way, they better be good. The wait is killing you.

You're taken aback by the sight you're met with when you arrive. This school is something else. You don't know much about architecture, but the main building looks really fancy, and the walls are spotless, as if they were painted yesterday. Maybe they were?

The inside is no less impressive. Everything feels ancient, but at the same time looks good as new. The sight is certainly impressive, but this is not what you're here for. That's right, you're here to test your skills.

The sports day commences, opened by headmasters from the host school and yours. Your fight is a special event reserved for last, thus decide to use the spare time you have to look around. The school looks nice, maybe there's something interesting to see here.

You slip out of the event grounds and head towards the gym building first. You want to see what your battlefield looks like.

You can't help but wonder if they ever considered hosting the Olympics here. You could see how big the building is from the outside, but now that you're in, it looks even more impressive. On the wall, there are signs leading to different areas. There's a swimming pool, a

tennis court, AND a general purpose hall, all in one building?

Only one of those interests you, however. The hall. Approaching the entrance, you can hear a characteristic sound, one that you're familiar with. It's the sound of bamboo swords clashing.

You take a peek through the door, and see two figures clad in kendo armour, one considerably taller than the other. It seems your opponent is still practicing. Learning your foe's tactics before the fight seems like a tempting idea, but you decide it wouldn't be fair for them. You step through the door and make your presence known.

"H-hello?", you timidly call out.

The practice stops, and the two kendoka turn to you.

"Oh hello. You don't seem familiar. You must be from the other school, are you lost?",The instructor takes off his helmet. His sparring partner remains in full armor, and merely looks at you.

"Um, no. I came here because I wanted to see how the place looks like", you answer.

"I see. Any particular reason for that?"

You think of an answer for a moment. It's only fair that you introduce yourself, since you interrupted their practice.

"Because I'm going to fight here. With you, I think?", you address the still-masked student. They take off their helmet.

Underneath it, you see an unusual girl. She looks 10, as you were told, but her deep blue eyes seem like they belong to somebody far older. Her skin is rather pale, and her black hair is tied into a ponytail, likely so that it doesn't get in the way during practice. However her most defining feature are the thick, bushy eyebrows. They almost look alive.

"Uh, nice to meet you. I'm Matoi Ryuuko.", you say, extending your hand.

She examines you thoroughly with her piercing gaze. She doesn't raise her hand to meet yours.

"Fourth year, Kiryuuin Satsuki.", she replies, her expression unreadable. "I hope you're well prepared." With that, she puts her helmet back on, and motions to the trainer to resume practice.

The trainer turns to you and shrugs with an apologetic expression.

"I suppose you'll have to wait for the fight for proper introductions. Did you need anything else?"

You shake your head, and turn to Satsuki, who is still waiting for the trainer.

"You bet I'm prepared."

Having said that, you turn to leave. What a weird girl. You're intrigued, though.

You decide to spend the remaining time alone, mentally preparing for the match. You rehearse basic tactics in your head.

You can't stop your thoughts from drifting to Kiryuuin Satsuki. Her behaviour seems really unusual. Normally you would assume that she's just spoiled, but you feel there's more to it than that. Perhaps you'll get the chance to ask her later.

As the time of the fight approaches quickly, you head back to the gym. Once there, you can already see a lot of people headed towards the upper floor, in order to watch the match. You make your way to the girls' changing room, where you find your PE teacher waiting for you, with a brand new shinai and armor.

She grins. "These are yours now, courtesy of the school. Remember, we're proud of you, whether you win or not."

You almost feel like jumping for joy, even though you're not usually one to do that. Your very own kendo gear, a gift from the school!

"Now, now, save the celebrating for later.", she says, chuckling a bit. "Go out there and show them what you're made of."

You nod, and start changing into the armor. It's a perfect fit, and it fills you with confidence. You grab the shinai, and take a couple swings in the air for practice. You're good to go.

You step out into the hall, and start walking towards the center. Satsuki is already there. You stop in front of her, a bit nervous. There's so many people watching. However, you can't let that weigh you down. You focus your eyes on your opponent. She raises her head to return the gaze.

The headmaster of the host school steps forward with a microphone.

"Now, everyone, as you can probably tell, this isn't an ordinary event during an elementary school sports day! There aren't many kendoka this young. Please give a round of applause for the two talented young ladies, Kiryuuin Satsuki, and Matoi Ryuuko!"

The audience explodes with cheers. Even children from your school are clapping, which surprises you. You and Satsuki take several steps back from the middle, and face each other again. You exchange a bow, and assume combat stances.

You can already tell, she won't be an easy opponent. Her stance is flawless, and she looks ready to strike at any moment. Something tells you that kendo rules are not going to be much of a factor here.
You're still not sure how she fights, attacking aggressively would be reckless. On the other

hand, defending would allow you to learn her style, but by the time you decide to counterattack, it might be too late. You opt to maintain a balance between attack and defense. Offensive defense, that sounds good.

The match begins, and Satsuki immediately charges at you. This isn't something you see often in kendo.

"MEN!"

You barely manage to block the strike aimed at your head, both shinai emitting a loud noise upon collision. This was a serious attack, she isn't looking for a normal match. She wants a duel.

In that case, a duel is what she's going to get. After attacking you, she seems to be waiting for your next move. She wants to learn your tactics as well.

You try to feint a couple attacks. She sees through them, and attempts to strike you again, to which you respond with another block. Feinting's no good, then. Just as you consider your next approach, Satsuki suddenly unleashes a wild flurry of attacks, too fast for you to guard yourself from. Does she even care about rules?

"MEN! DOU! KOTE! MEN! DOU! KOTE!"

This might be just a bamboo sword, and you're armored, but you can feel those hits nonetheless. You stumble to one knee. No time for thinking, huh? You pray that your brand new sword survives this ordeal, as you start countering her never-ending chain of attacks with one of your own. The sound of your shinai colliding fills the hall.

Meanwhile, your PE teacher and the local kendo instructor watch with expressions of disbelief on their faces.

"Is this really kendo?"

"Their own brand of it, it seems."

"TSUKI!", Satsuki calls out as she attempts to break the stalemate with a thrust. You push her sword aside with your own.

"You weren't bluffing when you said you're prepared.", she says, breathing heavily. You're pretty tired yourself.

"Of course!", you reply. "I trained hard for this, there's no way I can lose!"

"Then, shall we get serious?"

"Huh? Weren't we being se-"

Your sentence is interrupted by a lightning-quick thrust to your chest, which knocks the wind

out of you. She didn't call out this one!

"Calling out your attacks is something rookies and fools do. Surely, you aren't either, are you, Matoi Ryuuko?"

Now she's insulting you? What the hell is that girl's deal? ...Oh. This isn't an ordinary match, after all. She's intends to go all-out, and expects you to follow suit.

"Fine, have it your way. Let's do this.", you say, assuming a stance again.

"That's more like it." You both charge at each other, no longer calling out your attacks.

You have to find a way to end this match soon. The kendo instructor, acting as referee, has long since forgotten what he was supposed to do. You don't blame him. Still, that means the only option left is knockout.

Satsuki doesn't let you rest for even one moment. This isn't kendo anymore, it's just a regular sword fight with wooden swords. But, you don't let that faze you. It's what you've always wanted.

You block an oncoming flurry of strikes, and find an opening for a counter. This is it, your chance to finish this. You knock Satsuki's shinai aside, and charge in for an overhead strike.

And then you notice it. A hint of smile through her helmet's visor. And you realize your mistake.

Using the momentum you gave her by knocking her sword aside, Satsuki "sheathes" her sword to her side. Just as your own shinai is about to hit her helmet, she unleashes a sweep powerful enough to make a crack in your chest armor. You fall on your back, and don't get up.

You've lost. It hurts. And you're crying.

But, the pain is physical, and the tears are its side-effect. In your mind, you feel great. You expected this to be an ordinary, boring kendo fight, with light hits and counting points. Instead, you got an all-out battle. And for you, that is enough compensation for your loss.

You're still laying on the floor, your brand new armor and sword battered, and your body hurting all over. Suddenly, you notice Satsuki approaching you. She extends a hand to help you up.

And you accept it.

What happens afterwards feels like a blur. Nobody expected your match to turn into a serious duel, and so you're barraged with questions about your well-being.

After assuring every person asking that you are, in fact, alright, and don't need any help, you finally get some peace and quiet. You skip the closing ceremony, in order to think about what happened.

As you sit outside, lost in thought, you notice Satsuki in the corner of your eye. It seems she's been looking for you.

"Matoi Ryuuko.", she states plainly.

"Kiryuuin Satsuki", you answer, with a smile. "Why are we using our full names, anyway?"

You see a tiny smile appear on her face.

"Your skills are certainly impressive, and your demeanor intriguing. Come with me. I will help you sharpen this shinai of yours into a real sword."

"Huh?", you reply, surprised. "What do you mean, "come with me"?"

"I have arranged for you to be transferred to this school. All costs and paperwork will be taken care of. What will be your answer?"

This is rather sudden. You've only met this girl today, and she's already willing to go to such lengths for you? Maybe she's just making fun of you?

You raise a brow. "You... "have arranged"? How?"

She nods in understanding. "Your skepticism is understandable. I should probably introduce myself properly before making such offers. I am Kiryuuin Satsuki, heir to the Kiryuuin Conglomerate." That tiny smile again. "If I want something done, I merely need to make a few calls. I am serious about my offer, Matoi Ryuuko. I will not force you to accept it, however."

You figured she's a rich kid, but Kiryuuin Conglomerate? Don't they own like, practically everything in this part of the country? And she wants you to come to her school, for some reason. Whatever that reason might be, you feel this is your chance to make your first real friend.

"After a fight like this, how could I refuse?", you ask, laughing.

"Then it's settled."

On the same day you've accepted Satsuki's offer, most of the formalities were already taken care of. However, that's not even half of it.

To solve the issue of the lack of dorms attached to your new school, Satsuki had a small apartment purchased for you, right next to the school. She even mentioned there would be people hired to help you take care of it.

You examine your new home with disbelief. Compared to the mansion your father owns, it's not big, but when you recall your small room in the dorms, it feels really huge. It's fully furnished and equipped, and everything looks sparkling and new.

By the time you arrive, it's already pretty late, and you're still tired and bruised from the fight, so you decide to head right to sleep. You must definitely ask Satsuki some questions tomorrow, as well as thank her for all she's done for you, despite having barely met you.

You hear knocking on the door.

"Come in."

A rookie operative, Mikisugi Aikurou, steps in.

"Doctor Matoi, as per your orders, I have been monitoring your daughter's activities. I have something urgent to report."

You frown. Surely, Ragyou couldn't have figured it all out, could she?

"Let's hear it."

"It seems that Ryuuko has changed schools, Doctor."

You furrow your brows. "Changed schools?"

"Yes. According to the information we have on her new school, Kiryuuin Satsuki is one of the students."

You freeze in fear. It can't be, you covered all the tracks, and even resolved not to contact Ryuuko, just to prevent REVOCS from tracking her down.

"I have also managed to acquire copies of some of the paperwork concerning the transfer. Judging by the contents, it appears that Kiryuuin Ragyou was not involved in the process. Rather, it was little miss Satsuki herself who ordered it."

"Do you know anything about the circumstances surrounding this?", You ask, still filled with dread.

"Yes. The students from Ryuuko's old school came there for a sports day, and she was to fight Satsuki in a kendo match. I saw it myself. It was quite the spectacle, I must say."

You sigh heavily, relieved. Satsuki already started building her army, eh? Little does she know... And you wish you could've told her.

"Well, this is earlier than expected, but I have faith in them. Please, continue your task, Mikisugi."

"Yes, sir." He salutes, and leaves.

Aikurou, as well. You wish you could tell him the truth. And perhaps one day, you'll be able to.

You wake up in your new bed, feeling sore. The unfamiliar surroundings surprise you, before all of the events of yesterday start flowing in. One girl in the center of them all: Kiryuuin Satsuki.

You get up, and start preparing for school. You head for the kitchen, hoping to find something to eat. What you find is an already prepared full breakfast, and boxed lunch, as well as a note saying that you can expect the same every day. You could get used to this.

Fully prepared, you leave for the school, which is just a couple minutes' walk away. On your way there, you notice a short, pink-haired girl, surrounded by other students, like a queen and her entourage. Is that a monkey sitting on her head?

Arriving at the school, you spot Satsuki outside. Looks like she has been waiting for you. You wave in her direction, and she notices you, responding with a nod.

"Good morning. I hope that the apartment provided to you has proven adequate?", she asks.

"Adequate? I can't even begin to say how grateful I am to you. I need to thank your parents,

as well."

Hearing a mention of her parents, Satsuki looks away.

"My mother is a very busy person. You don't need to worry about it." You feel this is a touchy subject for her, so you decide not to inquire any further.

"I see. Now that I think of it, I transferred to this school, but I know nothing about it, or which class I'm in. Could you tell me a bit about that?"

"Good of you to ask. I was actually going to inform you that you're in the same class as me.", she replies.

"Huh? But aren't you a year older than me?"

"Your records indicate you skipped a year due to your outstanding performance.", she says with a hint of amusement in her voice.

"Uhh, I'm not so sure if I'll be able to keep up with studying. I'm honored and all, but why go through the trouble of putting me in the same class, anyway?"

"If I am to help you polish your talents, I can't wait a year for you to catch up after graduation. If studying turns out to be a problem, tutors will be hired to help you catch up.", she explains. "Now, the classes are about to begin, so let me show you to our classroom."

Suddenly, you hear a voice coming from the entrance.

"Satsuki-chaaan!" It's the pink-haired girl from before, waving at Satsuki. The other students who were following her to school start heading in their own directions.

"Good morning, Nonon."

Nonon then hugs Satsuki, who remains motionless. She then turns her attention to you.

"And who are you?" The rapid change in tone from sweet to vitriolic is astonishing. You find it hard to take her seriously, though; the small monkey, still perched on her head, seems to mimic her expressions.

"Uh, I'm Matoi Ryuuko. I transferred here just yesterday. Nice to meet you."

"Yeah, okay. Why are you talking to this boring transfer student, Satsuki-chan?" Nonon completely ignores your introduction. Not the nicest one around, it seems.

"She transferred here on my request, Nonon. Do you perhaps recall the last event of yesterday?"

"Huh? You mean it's that girl you fought yesterday? She lost, so what's so special about her?"

"She may have lost, but has nevertheless displayed a high level of skill, and her drive is certainly impressive. You shouldn't look down on people just because they've lost, Nonon.", Satsuki explains to her, as she frowns.

"Hmph." Nonon turns to you. "Fine, my name is Jakuzure Nonon, and I've been Satsuki-chan's friend way longer than you, transfer student. You can call me Lady Nonon."

"Uh, hi.", you reply. It seems that this girl is really craving for Satsuki's attention, enough to feel endangered by any new acquaintances of hers.

With that, she leaves.

"What's her deal?", you ask Satsuki.

"She's a friend back from kindergarten. She impressed me with her words back then. I realize she might appear clingy and unpleasant, but when it matters, she is a really reliable person."

Looks like you'll spend quite some time with Nonon as well, considering all three of you are in the same class.

And so, you begin your education in the new school. As you expected, the classes are tough, but you somehow manage. At the end of the first school day, you meet up with Satsuki again.

"Now, we'll begin the real education. Follow me." She leads you to the gym building.

Once you're in the hall, Satsuki brings two wooden swords. Those are not shinai. They're shaped like a katana, and made of solid wood. In other words, they're bokken.

"What are those for?", you ask.

"Kendo is certainly an interesting sport, but it's just that - a sport.", Satsuki explains. "I will need you- no, both of us, to practice our skills with weapons closer to real swords. We will keep this up until our graduation from this school, and then... we shall see."

"Fine by me.", you reply. "It'll be cool to try something new. And to be honest, after our fight, I'm not sure if I can return to normal kendo practice." You chuckle.

And you practice. Stances, strikes, blocking, parrying. Every day after school, the hall is cleared for you two to use. Some days, you can see Nonon sitting alone in the audience. She was pretty hostile towards you at first, but over time, she's grown to accept your position as another one of Satsuki's friends, seeing the effort you put into it. You still occasionally exchange snarky comments, but the aura of hostility gradually vanishes.

As for Satsuki herself, your relationship is one of rivalry in skills. She wanted a friend who could keep up with her, and found one in you. You don't talk to each other too much, rather you find a mutual understanding in battle. And through that understanding, you realize that she is hiding something, a dark secret. However, whenever you try to ask her about it, she tells you that "it's not time yet". Thus, you decide to wait. And eventually, your graduation arrives.

The two years of sword practice with Satsuki were definitely more effective than your earlier kendo practice. You can't even count the amount of wooden swords you've both shattered in that time. Improving every day, the two of you have reached a level of skill that could put some samurai to shame, and you're barely teenagers.

The graduation ceremony is over. You step outside to take a breath, and think. This has certainly been a better experience than the three years in your old school. Lost in your thoughts, you're suddenly approached by Satsuki, who is carrying something.

"We have graduated.", she declares. "That concludes the first part of our training. To celebrate, I have a gift for both of us."

Satsuki raises her arms to show two swords in scabbards. One black, one white, both almost identical. The difference lies in details, as the white sword has some kind of rope tied around its scabbard. She extends the hand with the black sword towards you.

"This is Kaizan. It's yours." You accept the sword from her hand. It's heavy. You can tell it's a real sword.

"My sword," she motions to the white one "is called Bakuzan. They are both forged from the most durable material on Earth. These are not ordinary swords."

"No kidding,", you say. "So, this is what we were training for?"

"That's right. Now, for our own graduation, we should use these for a blood oath."

"A blood oath? Sounds scary."

"Don't falter now. We will simply use our swords to draw a bit of blood from each other. That way, we'll seal our oath."

"And what will our oath be?", you ask.

Satsuki smiles.

"Everlasting mutual loyalty."

You've come this far, a little papercut won't hurt you. You already know you're going to stay by Satsuki's side, anyway.

You grab the hilt of the sword, and begin to unsheathe it. To your surprise, you find that the blade is pure white. Satsuki does the same, and you see that Bakuzan follows the same principle, its edge black as charcoal.

Satsuki extends her left hand, and you do the same. You simultaneously make small cuts on each other's fingers, just enough for blood to drip out. You wince in pain a bit, but you've definitely had worse during trainings. Satsuki smears your blood across her sword's blade, and you mimic her. You then both shake the blood off the swords, and sheathe them.

"With this, we have bound our fates together.", Satsuki says. "However, this is only the beginning. We will soon have to put our training to use. But before that happens, I need to tell you everything."

And she tells you a story that changes your outlook on her, yourself, and the world.

Life Fibers, parasitic lifeforms which take the form of clothing. Kiryuuin Ragyou, Satsuki's mother, a ruthless tyrant who serves their will, and will stop at nothing to accomplish her goals, even if it means killing her own newborn child. Kiryuuin Souichirou, Satsuki's father, who told her all this, and paid the ultimate price for his rebellion. And she herself, Kiryuuin Satsuki, shouldering this burden since she was five years old.

The story is hard to believe, but Satsuki wouldn't lie to you like that. It has to be true.

"After hearing all this, I'd gladly make the oath a second time. You can count on me. Whatever it takes, we'll make it right.", you say, extending your hand to her.

And this time, she shakes it.

After your double graduation day begins the short spring break. You wake up in your apartment. Throughout the two years you've spent here, you've grown quite fond of it, but this is probably one of your last few nights spent in it.

Satsuki told you that the two of you already have a spot in a certain middle school. She neglected to mention anything about it, however. Just as you're about to call her to ask about it, you hear knocking at the door. You peek through the visor, and see Satsuki. That's some perfect timing. You open the door to greet her.

"Good morning. I came here, since I concluded I should tell you a bit more about what

happens next."

"Hi. I, uh, was actually about to call you to ask about that." You chuckle.

"I see we think alike. Our next school will be Rinne-dou Middle School, a school in Kanagawa Prefecture.", she explains. "The choice is not random, nor defined by the school's academic qualities. But, I am getting ahead of myself, let me explain the next step of our plan. To accomplish my ultimate objective, which I revealed to you yesterday, I will need strong allies. You are one of them."

"So, we're going to that school to recruit somebody?", you ask. Looks like there's even more to her schemes than she's already told you.

"Quite possibly, yes. I want to gather a team of reliable companions, and with their help, create and maintain the final piece required to attain my goal: Honnouji Academy."

"Honnouji Academy? What's that supposed to be?"

"It will be a high school, one where students come not just to improve their skills, but also to test them. Their abilities will determine their power, and social status. Through this process, I will create an army fit to fight against Life Fibers."

"Sounds ambitious. Expected no less of you."

Suddenly, a cell phone rings. It's Satsuki's. She quickly produces it, and answers.

"This is Satsuki." She listens to the caller for a while. Something they say causes her to furrow her brows. "I see. I'll be there." She hangs up, and turns her attention to you again. "On topic of recruitment, an opportunity has just come up, I believe."

"Huh?"

"A certain young hacker has been infiltrating the computer systems of various companies belonging to Kiryuuin Conglomerate lately. This time, it appears he intends to target REVOCS itself."

That's the company Satsuki's mother runs. It's steadily becoming a monopolist on the apparel market, from what Satsuki has told you.

You raise your eyebrows. "What does that have to do with recruitment? You want to recruit a guy who ruins your stuff?"

Satsuki smirks. "Technically, it's Ragyou's stuff. I wish to enlist him, as I believe his skills would be an invaluable asset. A meeting is being arranged. Let's not keep Inumuta Houka waiting."

Later that day, you're observing the CCTV displays in a security room. A lanky kid in a hoodie has snuck into one of the server rooms, and is now tapping into the network using his laptop.

You snicker as you listen to the audio feed. He's practically bragging to himself. How full of himself is that guy? The plan is working perfectly so far. Inumuta was immediately attracted to the "loophole", like a bee to honey. Whatever damage he might inflict is beneficial to your cause, as it sets Ragyou's plans back.

As he continues to type and brag, suddenly, an alarm sounds off. Inumuta starts frantically looking around, until he notices the camera.

"I could've sworn I've disabled it!", you hear him shout.

Looks like it's time for you to move. You head towards the room Inumuta is sitting in, just a couple steps away. As you slam the door open, you hear shattering glass. The guy's determined, you'll give him that. He jumped out of the window! You run outside to circle around and catch him. You scouted out the streets beforehand, so you know where to cut him off.

You catch up, and stand in his way. "That's far enough."

Inumuta stops in surprise, and raises his hands, still holding the laptop. He takes a closer look at you, and starts laughing.

"A little girl? That's all REVOCS has to offer after I've made their stocks plunge?"

You reply by rapidly unsheathing Kaizan, and plunging it through his laptop, right above his head. You give him a smile, to which he responds with a loud gulp.. He falls to his knees in an apologetic bow.

"I'm sorry! What I did was wrong! It was just a harmless prank, you see!"

At least he knows when to give up. However, as part of the plan, you bring your sword's edge close to his throat. Inumuta starts sweating profusely.

"Come on, no mercy, seriously?"

"A harmless prank?" You hear Satsuki's voice behind you. "A middle-schooler has just dealt a staggering blow to the largest apparel company in the world. You're not giving yourself enough credit."

She raises her hand, glancing at you. You sheathe your sword and stand aside.

"REVOCS higher-ups are all little girls? Interesting.", Inumuta mutters to himself.

"Why did you do this?"

"It's the tightest security system in the world. I saw an opportunity to challenge it, and took it."

Satsuki gives him a disdainful look. "How petty-minded. If you want to challenge the system, shouldn't you aim to change the real world, and not just a virtual one?"

She tosses an envelope in his direction, which he opens , and reads the contents.

He raises his eyebrows. "Honnouji Academy High School?"

"That is the place where you will change the world, Inumuta Houka.", Satsuki says, and turns to leave. Meanwhile, Inumuta is still sitting on the ground, dumbfounded.

"You'll need a new apartment yet again, and so will I.", Satsuki says.

"Seems like it. Sorry for putting you through this trouble."

She shakes her head. "It's hardly an issue. However, this time things will be a little different. I hope you don't mind, but we have only managed to find one adequate housing in the area. Therefore, it seems we will have to live together."

"Huh?" Living in one house with another person again, and with Satsuki no less? "Sure, I don't mind."

"I'm glad." You notice a tiny hint of blush on Satsuki's face. It seems she's not as good with people as she wants them to believe. Oh well. You could say the same about yourself.

After a while of travel, you both arrive at your new temporary home. It is no less "adequate" than the previous one, perhaps a bit more, even. Both of you have a large room of your own. There is also a third room, currently empty. You inquire Satsuki about it.

"Nonon does not know about the school we've chosen. We shall see how she reacts to this.", she explains.

That's a bit harsh. "It's your call, but do you really think that's okay? She's obviously your friend, you don't need to verify that."

"I don't doubt that she is my friend. What I want to verify is not her friendship, but her willingness to follow me wherever my goal takes me."

You can see it in her eyes. She doesn't want to, but has resolved to do it anyway. You can respect that.

You nod. "I get you. Sorry for being so pushy."

"No, it's good of you to comment on that. I don't want to lose sight of myself, and become like... her." Satsuki averts her gaze.

You spend the last few days of spring break getting used to your new apartment, as well as the presence of another person in it. As it turns out, Satsuki is a bit different in private than she is in public.

The morning following your arrival, you are awoken by sounds coming from the kitchen. You head there, still half-asleep. What you see there is beyond your wildest expectations.

Satsuki is standing by the kitchen counter, preparing breakfast. She doesn't immediately notice you, so you take the opportunity to watch for a bit. She seems a bit slow and clumsy at handling the kitchen knife. A young master swordsman, having trouble slicing a tomato. You can't help but let out a chuckle. Satsuki immediately jumps and looks at you with fright.

"Ah, Ryuuko! As you can see, I'm preparing breakfast." Her voice is slightly shaky.

"So I see. You look like you need a hand." You give her a wide smile.

She looks away. "Y-you don't need to help, I can handle this myself." As she says that, she cuts her finger. Her eyes start getting a little watery, more out of embarrassment than pain. You quickly bring her a band-aid.

"Don't worry, I won't let the mighty Kiryuuin Satsuki fall to this tomato." With your powers combined, you finish preparing the breakfast.

The spring break ends, and your first year of middle school begins. Again, you are roused from your sleep by sounds from the kitchen. This time, they seem a lot more systematic. Did Satsuki learn how to cook so fast?

However, it's not her that you see in the kitchen. A tall, elderly man in a suit and an apron over it is masterfully chopping vegetables. He notices you, and pauses his work.

"Ah, Lady Ryuuko, good morning." He bows respectfully to you. Lady?

"Uh, hello. Who are you?"

"Please forgive my rudeness. I am Mitsuzou Soroi, Lady Satsuki's personal butler. You can call me Soroi. Lady Satsuki requested that I visit this house occasionally to provide assistance. I hope that my presence does not bother you."

A personal butler. Wow. It seems Satsuki has given up on cooking quickly.

"Not at all. Could you tell me where Satsuki is, Mr. Soroi?"

"Lady Satsuki has gone out to retrieve your new school uniforms. She has told me to ask you to wait for her to return, if it's not too much trouble."

Thus, you wait, and Satsuki arrives. Sure enough, she brings two sailor uniforms, one white and blue, for herself, and one black and red, for you, both long-skirted. This is the first time you have to wear a uniform to school, as neither of the elementary schools you've attended enforced such rule. Something seems off, though.

"Aren't school uniforms usually more... uniform?", you ask. "I mean, they look the same, but the colors are different."

"Those are custom-made. Rinne-dou uniforms actually look completely different.", Satsuki answers. "However, we will not abide by their dress code, as we have no intention of integrating into their system. No, we will subjugate that system."

"Subjugate?"

"I intend to use this school as experiment grounds before Honnouji Academy. To test our preparedness, we will make the predominantly delinquent student body bow to our will. And who knows..." Satsuki smirks. "Perhaps we will run into another worthy candidate."

The two of you finish your breakfast, change into the uniforms, and set out for your new school.

Satsuki's description of the school was accurate - it's not really impressive. The building isn't particularly old, but it doesn't look new, either. The lush, green surroundings are a way nicer sight.

The opening ceremony is brief, and classes begin afterwards. With the exception of you and Satsuki, all the first years look frightened. Given the school's reputation, you don't blame them. It makes you reflect for a moment, however. The time spent with Satsuki has changed you a fair bit.

Your first middle school classes soon end. The two of you meet up outside, and decide to take a "tour" of the school to learn more about it. While at it, you knock out several older students, who mistook you for easy pickings for bullying.

"I'd say this school is dangerous, but I'd be lying." You laugh.

Suddenly, you hear some commotion on the school roof. A fight? You take a closer look, to see that some kid is sitting on the fence, and is about to jump off.

"Oh, fuck!"

Without thinking, you run towards the building as fast as you can, and interrupt the student's fall at the last second. He looks like a big rat in a school uniform.

"Are you stupid?!", you yell at him, only to notice he's unconscious. The fall must've been a shock to him.

You slowly set him down on the ground, and look up. A large group of students is looking down from the rooftop.

"Oh, some girl caught him! Still, I can't believe he actually did it!", one of them says, and laughs. "I guess we'll let it slide, then. That was awesome."

A kid almost died, and they're calling that "awesome"? This place is more disgusting than you assumed it to be.

Satsuki steps forward, deep disdain painted on her face. "We're going up there."

You do so. While heading up, Satsuki pulls out her cell phone, and makes a couple calls.

The rooftop is quite crowded. Your attention is drawn to a particularly burly (and particularly orderly-looking) student, but it seems he's merely an observer. You saw the faces of the two ringleaders, and they're still here.

"Look, guys! Two little girls are upset we dropped a lowlife on their heads! We better run!" The group laughs.

"Why did you do this?", Satsuki asks in a stern tone.

"And what do you care? Be happy it wasn't you! The kid messed with us, and got what was coming to him! With the kind of backing we have, nobody in this town fucks with us!"

"Backing? Are you perhaps referring to your parents' influence? Houjou and Imagawa, was it?" Satsuki looks at the two leaders.

"That's right!"

"Your parents have just been relieved of their duties. They no longer have any influence, and neither do you. I am the new ruler of this school's students."

"What's this crap you're spouting? Who the hell do you think you are?!"

"First year class A, Kiryuuin Satsuki.", Satsuki answers. "Whether you believe me or not is irrelevant. You have two choices: submit to my rule, or challenge it, and fail."

The delinquents laugh again. "Your rule?! Whatever. Get them, guys!"

You exchange nods, and prepare your swords. Without unsheathing them, you easily sweep the oncoming goons aside, and approach the bewildered leaders.

"P-please forgive us! We-"

"She already gave you a chance to give up, you know.", you cut in. "You blew it."

With the two joining the pile of unconscious bodies, your work is done. As you turn to leave, the burly guy from earlier stands in your way.

"And you are?", Satsuki asks.

"Student Council President, Gamagoori Ira!", he exclaims. His voice is the very definition of booming. He glances at you. "I must thank you for saving the life of that student, but... I've heard your conversation a moment ago! I will not allow another "ruler" in this school! The students have suffered enough at the hands of those two!"

Satsuki gives him a long, analytic gaze. "My mind is made. All I can tell you is this: fools like these, toying with human lives for their amusement, will no longer be tolerated. My rule is one with purpose, with resolve. You are free to oppose me, but know that I will eventually make you kneel before me."

In the following days, Satsuki stayed true to her words, and with your help, established her rule over the school. As she explained to you before, it's supposed to be an experiment before the real deal, Honnouji Academy. With the previous sovereigns taken care of, the path is clear for the two of you to rule. Well, almost.

Having seen your display of power back on the school roof, Gamagoori appears to have decided not to interrupt for now. He is most definitely observing, however. Is he planning something himself?

Roughly a week after your encounter with Gamagoori, during the weekend, you hear knocking at the door. Satsuki has gone out with Soroi to stock up on food and other necessities, leaving you alone in the house.

You approach the door, and peek through the visor. On the other side you see Nonon, with several large travel bags next to her. Seems she's finally caught up. You open the door to greet her.

She immediately starts talking. "Satsuki-chan, how could you just leave without saying a wo-" She freezes, noticing who she's actually talking to. "NANI SORE?! What are you doing here, transfer student?!"

"Uh, I live here. It's nice to see you again, too."

"B-but, I was told that Satsuki-chan lives here! Did I get the wrong address?!"

"No, that's correct. We both live here."

Nonon's face changes color to deep purple. That can't be healthy.

As opposed to Satsuki, who is, aside from her cooking skills, practically a perfect roommate, Nonon is a bit more difficult to live with, mostly due to her hobbies, which involve blaring classical music at full volume. While you don't mind a little Bach or Pachelbel once in a while, waking up to their tunes at 7 AM on a Sunday is not something you'd like to experience often.

Thankfully, Satsuki shares that opinion, even though she always wakes up around that time anyway. It seems little overkill, but then again, you find it hard to get up at that hour when you are supposed to do so. Perhaps you're not the right person to judge.

One day after class, the three of you meet the last person you expected to see here.

"An interesting choice of school, I must say."

Leaning against a nearby tree is Inumuta Houka, wearing Rinne-dou's male uniform.

"I see you've managed to track us down.", Satsuki says.

Inumuta adjusts his glasses. "It wasn't easy, I must admit. You never gave me your names, so the search took a while. Even then, I've only managed to find information on you, Kiryuuin Satsuki. Your violent friend's identity still remains a mystery to me." He shudders ever so

slightly.

"Matoi Ryuuko. I was only as violent as Satsuki needed me to be." You grin.

"I see you've brought somebody else along." He turns his gaze to Nonon. "Did she skip some grades, perhaps?"

"...Satsuki-chan, can I kill him?!"

Seems those two will get along just fine.

It's a Saturday morning, and you are sleeping soundly. Up until the moment Nonon slams the door open, that is.

"Wake up, transfer student! It's important!"

"Shouldn't I be calling you a transfer student now?", you mutter drowsily.

She sighs. "...Fine, get up, Ryuuko. Just hurry up!"

Well, if she's willing to call you by your name just to wake you up, you won't object any further. It must be urgent. After several minutes, you meet her in the kitchen.

"What's so important for you to personally wake me up so early on a weekend? Usually one of your composer buddies does that for you."

Nonon's expression is a serious one. "We need to talk. About Satsuki."

You tilt your head. "Huh? Come to think of it, where is she?"

"She left just a moment ago. She said she's going to her family's mansion."

"Her mother wants her to visit? I hope she'll be fine."

"...That's the thing. Just before she left, I noticed something about her expression..." Nonon averts her gaze. "She really didn't want me to see it, but I've known her for too long not to notice. She was terrified."

"Terrified? Of visiting home? I know Ragyou is an awful person, but... why would she be outright scared? This isn't like her."

"...I don't know, and that's why it worries me."

The two of you spend some time sitting around under a gloomy atmosphere. Why would Satsuki behave like that? Is she scared her mother will discover her intentions? Or is it something else entirely?

You sigh, and stand up. "No point brooding over this. We'll have to try asking her once she gets back. For now, let's do something to get this off our minds."

Nonon gives you a puzzled look. "Like what?"

You smile. "You'll like it."

Probably. Or maybe not.

"I can't... believe... I agreed... to this.", Nonon chokes out in pauses between panting heavily.

"You're only wearing yourself out more by complaining like that, you know!"

In Satsuki's absence, you asked Nonon to be your jogging partner. As opposed to sword practice, you only really do it on weekends. There's not much time to run around the town's outskirts on school days.

"How... much... longer?" Your stand-in jogging partner is lacking in endurance.

"You giving up already? We're only halfway through!"

She only manages a groan in response. Maybe you should take a break for her sake? She's not really used to this, after all. You spot a convenience store ahead along your path.

"We're gonna take a break over there, so hang on!"

As consolation, you pay for the water for both of you. Nonon gulps her bottle down as if she's spent the past two days on a desert.

Once done, she exhales in relief. "You two seriously do this every weekend?"

"Usually, yeah. It really helps improve your stamina, which comes in handy when you swing a heavy sword around."

"...I hope you're not gonna take me weight lifting next, or something."

You chuckle. "Why would I lift weights? This and the actual sword practice is all I need."

"I don't know, to... get stronger? So you can swing the sword around more easily?"

"That's what the practice is for. There's nothing to be gained from that kind of workout for me. People who lift weights usually do it to build musculature for show, not strength. It makes them stronger, sure, but in combat, real strength lies in knowing how to move your

body, and being flexible enough to do it."

"Right..."

You grin. "And jogging is just fine for that! Come on!"

Nonon is not amused, but complies nevertheless. You return home exhausted, but feeling better than you did in the morning.

"...I'm never going jogging again.", Nonon declares, stepping out of the bathroom after her shower. "I can barely feel my legs, and it almost hurts to breathe."

"Come on, it's not so bad. Besides, don't you play wind instruments? Jogging is a good way to improve your lung capacity."

"What are you, a walking fitness encyclopedia?", she scoffs. "And anyway, is it really a good idea to train like that at this age?"

You shrug. "In sports, if you want to get anywhere, you gotta start young. What Satsuki and I are doing isn't a sport, but the training isn't all that different. Plus, we have to be ready in several years, so we don't have much of a choice, do we?"

"I guess..."

Nonon spends the rest of the day resting. Left with nothing better to do, you opt to laze around, as well. The apartment feels empty without Satsuki in it. You considered calling her, but it's probably best not to. You hope she's doing alright.

The following day is much like the previous one. Since Satsuki is going to come back late, you and Nonon are left in the same situation as yesterday. Well, you are, at least. Nonon is taking awfully long to get up, for some reason. You decide to check on her.

You knock at her room's door, and, hearing no response, invite yourself in. Nonon is lying flat on the bed, breathing, but otherwise motionless.

"What's with you today? Come on. You always get up before I do."

She groans. "...Not today. Not ever again. I'm dying. Finish me off."

"That's the spirit." You walk over to her bedside, and help her sit up. "What's wrong, anyway?"

"What do you think? I'm hurting all over from that jog yesterday."

You raise your eyebrows. "Seriously? That was like, a full day ago! Do you not exercise at all?"

Nonon's face looks as if she's just stepped on something nasty. "I'll say it again: what do you

think?"

"Sorry." Guess it's your fault. You pulled her in the middle of a training routine you and Satsuki are already used to.

""Sorry" won't cut it. We're watching a movie."

You chuckle. "That's my punishment?"

Famous last words.

It's finally over. It's your turn to be lying flat on your back. "Man, who the hell cares enough about Wagner to watch a 5 hour long movie about his life?"

"I do. All great musicians were troubled in some way.", Nonon answers. "Get off my bed."

You reluctantly get up, and stretch a bit. "Well, a movie about your troubles would thankfully be pretty short."

Immediately upon saying that, you get a face full of Nonon's pillow.

Having watched the movie, you head out for today's belated jog. Nonon refused to come along this time, but she did say she'll consider occasionally joining you and Satsuki. That's something. Still, with nobody to match paces with, you're feeling a bit lonely. As you run along your usual track, lost in thought, a familiar voice calls out to you.

"Good to see you don't always lug that sword around!"

You stop, and turn around to see Inumuta. "Huh? What are you doing here, four-eyes?"

"Same thing as you, it would seem."

You stare at him, wide-eyed. "*You're* jogging?!"

He nods. "I am, yes. Is there a problem with that?"

"But, you're a nerd! Nerds don't jog!"

He adjusts his glasses. "I beg to differ. In my line of work, quick feet are a good thing to have."

"...You're not gonna deny that you're a nerd?"

Inumuta is the last person you'd expect to be your stand-in jogging partner. Still, it's better than running alone.

"She'll be here any moment!"

"You're gonna ask her, then?"

"Why don't you do it?"

"I thought you're her oldest friend. If she's willing to tell someone, it's you."

Nonon sighs. "Let's just ask her together."

A few moments later, Satsuki and Soroi arrive at the door. Satsuki's expression is like a stone mask. You haven't seen a face like this from her in a long time. It really is worrying.

"I'm sorry for leaving on such a short notice. Ryuuko, I trust Nonon relayed to you the reasons behind my absence?"

You nod. "She did, yeah. Welcome back."

You exchange glances with Nonon, and nod to each other.

"Satsuki-chan, are you alright?", Nonon asks.

"I'm fine.", she answers flatly.

"You don't look so well.", you chime in. "You sure everything's okay?"

"I'm... fine...", Satsuki mutters weakly, averting her gaze.

Soroi steps in between you and her. "Please forgive my rudeness, but Lady Satsuki is exhausted from the long journey. She needs to rest, as tomorrow is a school day."

He leads Satsuki away from you and Nonon, and to her room. You can clearly see worry written all over his face, however.

"...I guess we'll have to try later.", you say. "Just what the hell happened?"

"Satsuki-chan..."

The following day, on your way to school, the two of you attempt to ask Satsuki about it

again, to no avail. She ignores your questions on the subject, and forcibly changes the topic. Whatever it is, she really wants to keep it to herself. Is that really alright, though?

As Satsuki's influence over the school strengthens, Gamagoori steps up his efforts, as well. No longer content with merely observing, he starts attempting to block your advance with his Student Council authority. However, as his actions remain within the school's rules, their impact is limited. Still, you can't shake the feeling he's not done.

The rest of the year passes by fairly quickly. To your surprise, Nonon occasionally joins you and Satsuki in your weekend morning runs. Unfortunately, Satsuki's periodical visits to Kiryuuin Manor continue as well. You want to know why they cause her so much grief, but she persists in refusing to tell you or Nonon anything.

You pull out your cell phone to check the time. Satsuki's late. "Where is she? Didn't she tell us to wait for her here?"

"She did. Come to think of it, where did she even go? And why is the nerd here?" Nonon gives Inumuta a scornful glare.

"Settle down, Jakuzure. I'm waiting here because I was asked to, just like the two of you."

You stroke your chin. "...Come to think of it, wasn't Gamagoori absent from the ceremony, too? I didn't see him anywhere, and I don't think I'd overlook somebody as big as him."

"Nani sore? That rule freak skipped his own graduation?"

You hear Satsuki's voice behind you. "He indeed has, and I don't think he'll ever regret it."

You turn to face her. "Satsuki! Wait, what do you mean by that?"

"Did something happen?", Nonon adds.

"When the time comes, Gamagoori will join us in Honnouji Academy.", Satsuki says.

"...What?"

She briefly describes her run-in with Gamagoori during the graduation ceremony. It seems that he wanted to challenge Satsuki's rule over the school one more time before leaving. Instead, he ended up getting recruited by her, as she was impressed by his resolve.

"With Gamagoori on our side, Rinne-dou Middle School is under our complete control. That means we are going to move on to the second phase of our plan."

You raise a brow in interest. That's new. "Second phase? What's that?"

Satsuki smirks. "Conquest of all middle schools in Kanto."

"I wanted to ask you something, but I forgot to earlier.", you say, parrying an oncoming attack.

"Hm?" Satsuki refuses to have any of your riposte, and swiftly moves aside, preparing another strike.

"What's the point in conquering all those schools?" You block the next few quick strikes. "I mean, I get that it's all in preparation for Honnouji Academy, but why exactly?"

In anticipation for the answer, you fail to notice a small movement of Satsuki's hand in time. Just as her sword is about to connect with yours, she slightly tilts it, allowing her to push yours aside, and get a clean hit on you, strong enough to make you fall over.

"Ow."

Satsuki looks at you from above, smiling slightly. "You need to pay more attention." She leans down, and offers a hand to help you up.

Your eyes drift away from the hand, and towards her face. Her strong features make a lot of her expressions appear stern, but when she's smiling like this, she looks pretty.

"Ryuuko?"

You blink, and shake your head slightly. What was that? Did you hit your head while falling?

"Uh, sorry. Was a bit dazed for a moment there." You grab Satsuki's hand, and she helps you stand up.

"To answer your question, it's a manner of recruitment drive."

"Recruitment drive?"

Satsuki nods. "That's right. Through conquest of other schools, we're bound to find promising students, whom we can then invite to join us in Honnouji Academy."

"Then, it's similar to how you've found me, Inumuta, and Gamagoori?" Nonon found Satsuki rather than the opposite, from what you gather.

"Not exactly. You are referring to the elite, handpicked by me. Here, the process will be less personal. Our army needs more than just generals - it needs soldiers."

The indirect praise makes you blush a bit. "...I see. So, when do we start?"

"As soon as possible. For now, let's continue."

She lets go of your hand, and- wait, she was holding your hand all this time? You didn't even notice.

"...Yeah, let's."

There's a certain pattern you've noticed in Satsuki's behavior. Whenever she comes back from visiting her mother, all gloomy and serious, she appears to look forward to training. She trains harder than usual, getting more aggressive, and rarely letting you create any distance between the two of you. By the time you're done for the day, her expression becomes considerably brighter.

The conquest turns out to be considerably less engaging than you thought it would be. It's less of an actual conquest, and more of a demonstration of power by Satsuki. All it boils down to is arriving at the school, beating down any resistance, and having Gamagoori (who, despite having already graduated, is part of the "war party") lecture the defeated students about Honnouji Academy in a loud and commanding tone. That's something he's good at.

You can't help but feel there should be more to it, but in the end, it really is just a recruitment drive. The real deal begins in two years, once you've graduated from middle school.

"...Sorry, Satsuki, but I'm done for today. I'm feeling like Nonon did... the first time I took her jogging." You're panting just as heavily, as well. Difference is, Nonon didn't sprawl herself on the floor.

Yesterday evening, Satsuki came back from another visit to Kiryuuin Manor. You already

knew the training today would be rough, but nothing could've prepared you for what happened. Your current miserable state is the result.

"Perhaps we should take a break, then.", Satsuki says.

You groan. "Satsuki, please... It's been like four hours now. I'm not made of steel like you are. I'm not sure if I'll be able to move at all tomorrow morning."

She sighs. "Very well. Let's call it a day."

"Thanks. I don't think I'd be able to hold a sword, anyway."

Still, you need a moment to recover. Wooden sword or not, that last hit was pretty hard, and you were already barely able to stand straight before it. You attempt to regulate your breathing. Your eyelids feel rather heavy.

"Don't fall asleep here, Ryuuko!"

"...Huh?" Your eyes spring open, and you see Satsuki looming over you, upside down. "Sorry, I'm tired as hell."

Her chest has grown again. Do 14 year olds usually have breasts this big? More to the point, are 13 year olds usually as flat as you are? She wasn't.

"Have you fallen asleep with your eyes open?"

"...No, no. I'm getting up now." You unsuccessfully attempt to sit up. Your body feels like it's made of lead. Very sore lead, at that. "Mind giving me a hand?"

It's already dark outside. What bothers you more, however, is Satsuki's expression. It's not the usual face of exhausted relief she has after those trainings. She's tired, but still troubled. Is that why she wanted to keep going?

You really want to ask her about it, but you know it's a futile effort. If Kiryuuin Satsuki chooses to keep something to herself, nothing can make her change her mind. All you can do to help her is give the trainings your all. Unfortunately, it turns out your all is not sufficient anymore. You can't help but feel guilty at that.

"Is something the matter?"

Your eyes widen slightly. She's down in the dumps herself, but still cares enough to ask about your well-being? "...I guess. I couldn't keep up with you today. You wanted to continue, but I was already running on fumes. Sorry about that."

"No, I should be the one apologizing. I shouldn't have dragged the practice out like this. I just... needed to let out some stress."

"You wanna talk about it?" The odds are near zero, but you feel you should try anyway.

Satsuki looks away, and continues walking in silence.

As it turns out, Nonon has already gone to sleep. It's no wonder, considering how late it is.

You yawn. "Well, I'm gonna hit the sack. Goodnight, Satsuki."

She absently nods in response, and heads towards her own room.

Your bed feels softer than usual. Perhaps your body is making a comparison to the floorboards you were lying on an hour earlier. Or maybe it's because you're tired as all hell. Could be a bit of both.

As you slowly doze off, suddenly you feel something shift on your bed. You gasp in surprise, and turn to face the perpetrator. It's quite dark in your room, but you can see enough to tell who just laid down next to you.

"S-Satsuki?! What are you..."

"Let me stay here. Please." The soft, pleading tone is not something you ever expected to hear from Kiryuuin Satsuki. It fills you with a weird feeling, one that you can't quite describe.

"O-okay."

A tiny sigh of relief. "Thank you. Goodnight, Ryuuko."

"...Goodnight, Satsuki."

She turns to lie on her back, and closes her eyes. You give her peaceful face a single lingering glance, and attempt to sleep, as well.

You've never actually shared a bed with another person before, and never expected to, especially with Satsuki. The feeling is not unpleasant, but somehow makes you feel uneasy. Despite your exhaustion, you can't seem to fall asleep with another person lying next to you. Or maybe it's because it's Satsuki? It's really unusual. You enjoy spending time with her, but her proximity makes you restless. Why is that?

Eventually, the drowsiness takes over. Satsuki's calm, rhythmic breathing is soothing to the ear. You should sleep, as well.

All things considered, it feels nice.

"I said wake up, damn it!" Nonon's shrill voice interrupts your slumber.

You let out a heavy sigh, transitioning into a groan. That practice really did catch up with you. Every muscle in your body is painfully expressing its disapproval.

"I'm awake.", you mutter. "But I can't get up. It hurts. Everything hurts."

Nonon shakes her head, and approaches your bedside to help you. Just then, you remember. Satsuki. You immediately sit up, forgetting about the pain. Wide-eyed, you examine your surroundings. Satsuki is nowhere to be found. Was it just a dream?

Nonon raises a brow. "What's with you? You said you can't get up."

"...I got better. Is Satsuki waiting for us?" You slowly leave the bed.

"You think I'd wake you up if she wasn't? She asked me to."

You prepare for the day, as fast as your sore body allows you. All finished up, you head to the kitchen. As soon as you lock gazes with Satsuki, it becomes clear: it wasn't a dream. She immediately breaks off eye contact, and stares at a nearby wall with an abashed expression. You follow suit, opting to concentrate your eyes on a window.

"...Good morning."

"...Morning."

"...I trust you slept well?"

"Y-yeah."

"That's... good."

"...What about you?"

"I... too, had a good night's sleep."

Nonon interrupts your incredibly awkward "conversation" by entering the kitchen. She gives you a stern look, causing you to gulp loudly.

"Are you going to actually eat something, or just stand around here?"

"...Huh?"

"What do you mean, "you can't"?"

Inumuta closes his laptop, and sighs. "It means I am unable to, Matoi. Simple as that."

"Can't you just like, keep looking?"

"There is nothing to look for. It's simply not there. Somebody erased all the recordings."

You cross your arms. "Tch. You're useless, four-eyes."

"I'm not the one who beat those delinquents to a pulp without even asking who they are."

"They attacked me out of nowhere! You think I waste time talking when somebody is trying to stab me?"

"All I'm saying is, maybe you shouldn't have instantly knocked them out, and maybe you shouldn't have let them get away."

"*Maybe* I should've aimed a bit below the laptop that one time."

Satsuki drives Bakuzan's scabbard into the floor with a loud clack.

"That's enough, both of you. We were caught off-guard. Instead of wasting time disputing who is at fault, you should learn from your mistakes, to make sure you don't repeat them."

You sigh. "Yeah, I know. Still... Who the hell are those guys, and what do they want from us?"

"Since they're delinquents, I'd wager they're feeling threatened by our conquest."

You raise a brow. "And that's a reason to attack us in a school where nobody knows them?"

"It could be a warning of sorts.", Inumuta chimes in. "Perhaps we're approaching their territory, and they want to scare us away."

You shrug. "Sucks to be them."

Since the first time she did it, Satsuki has developed a habit of sneaking into your bed. It seems she does it every time something is bothering her. Thus, she visits you several times a month. The fact she always leaves before you wake up makes you a bit sad, but she probably doesn't want Nonon to find out.

Neither of you has the courage to talk to the other about it. You're not sure of Satsuki's reasons, but you simply don't know what to think. Is it normal? What would Nonon say if she knew? Maybe she already knows, but chooses not to bring it up? Lastly, why does it make you feel so odd? Those questions are eating away at you, but you're not sure if knowing the answers would help you.

Yet again, you feel the characteristic movement of the mattress as it reacts to Satsuki's weight. With both of you lying on your sides, her back meets yours. It sends an odd shiver down your spine.

"You know.", you mutter drowsily. "You could just ask. I wouldn't say no."

"...Sorry. And... thank you. For indulging my selfishness, that is."

"Don't sweat it. We're friends, right?"

"Friends...", she whispers to herself, barely loud enough for you to hear.

"Night, Satsuki."

"...Goodnight, Ryuuko."

You close your eyes, and start slowly drifting off to sleep. You've since grown used to Satsuki's presence in your bed. In fact, you occasionally feel lonely when she's not here. You doubt you could build up the courage to sneak into her bed, though.

A sudden weight shift jolts you awake. Is she leaving? You don't want her to. Slowly turning, you look to the side, and feel like sighing in relief. She merely stirred in her sleep, and is now lying on her back, the bedsheets thrown aside. With your eyes adjusted to the dark, you can see her quite clearly.

Something about the way her nightie drapes over her body is hypnotizing. Her thighs, hips, breasts... For a while, you watch her chest move up and down as she breathes. All of it sends that weird, nagging feeling across your body again. Is this normal?

You turn your attention to her face. Even in sleep, her features maintain the royal, dignified look. It's an even more mesmerizing sight than the rest of her body. Your eyes rest on her lips. Soft and smooth, they seem... inviting?

Why can't you get your eyes off them?

Before you can fully process your thoughts, you lean towards Satsuki, and press your own lips against hers. They really are soft. Up close like this, her face is somehow even more beautiful.

...Just what the hell are you doing?!

You pull back, wide-eyed, and cover your mouth. What's gotten into you? You quickly lie down, and remain perfectly still. Your heart is thrashing in your chest like crazy. Why did you do this?

After a while of complete silence, you crack an eyelid open, and glance at Satsuki. It seems she didn't wake up from that. You quietly sigh in relief, and absentmindedly lick your lips. The lingering taste, Satsuki's taste, makes you feel all tingly. Why? You're a complete idiot.

Maybe it's all just some odd dream, and you need to fall asleep to wake up in the real world. Thinking that, you attempt to clear your mind. Unsuccessfully. After a while the softness and warmth of Satsuki's lips invades your mind again.

Wait, you're not just imagining it.

Your first kiss was with a girl. With Kiryuuin Satsuki, no less. Some friend you are.

As usual, by the time you wake up, Satsuki is gone. Maybe she shouldn't come back. Not because you don't enjoy her company, but because it seems you enjoy it too much. Her close proximity fills your head with weird, incomprehensible thoughts. You lack control, and you don't want to upset her with some impulsive action. In fact, maybe you've already upset her?

But... she did kiss you back.

You sit up, and shake your head. That's not the issue. The issue is that you couldn't rein in your weird impulses. She didn't recruit you for this. You're supposed to help her reach her ultimate goal - bringing her mother down. Instead, you dragged her into something you don't comprehend yourself. If being close to Satsuki means doing things like this, maybe you should keep your distance, like you're supposed to. Do what she needs you to do, and nothing more.

You leave the bed. Today is Saturday, which means a morning run. That's something you can do, as it's part of your training. You really hope Nonon's coming along this time, though. A third person's presence would help you keep your mind clear.

She kissed you. Does that mean she feels the same way?

...No, no. This kind of thinking is what caused you to return the kiss, and it took all of your self-restraint to stop at that. If she was awake, she would've been able to hear your ragged breathing perfectly. Regardless, even if you got lucky this time, this has to stop. You told yourself you would never become like your mother, but what is this if not something she would applaud?

The kiss Ryuuko gave you... it was chaste, innocent. She no doubt acted on impulse, but perhaps it was a way of expressing the trust she puts in you? She played along with your selfish whims, allowing you to sleep with her, when the training was no longer enough to get... certain things off your mind. Are you going to betray that trust now? Is that what you seek to do?

You shake your head. No. You would never forgive yourself for that. While you can't deny your attraction to Ryuuko, the respect you have for her takes priority. She considers you a friend, and you don't want to challenge that belief. You can't force her to like you the same way you like her.

Still, training is training. Like every Saturday and Sunday, you're going jogging with Ryuuko. Nonon, as well - if she's willing, that is. You head towards her room, and knock on the door. No response. You silently open the door, and take a look inside, to see Nonon sleeping soundly. Normally, she would be up by now, but you opt not to interrupt her. Another awkward conversation between you and Ryuuko might take place, and you don't want to drag Nonon into it.

Well, you're ready to go now. Stepping out of the bathroom, you come face to face with Satsuki.

Maintain eye contact, you think to yourself.

"Good morning, Ryuuko.", Satsuki says, after a good while of silence.

"M-morning.", you mutter. Wait, no. That's too casual. You clear your throat. "...Good morning, Satsuki."

For a second, one of Satsuki's generous eyebrows shoots up. More silence follows. You opt to wait for her to say something first.

"Well then... are you ready to go?"

You nod in response. "Is Nonon coming along?"

"It doesn't seem she's willing to come today, no. She's still sleeping."

Crap. That's not good. How are you supposed to get your mind off Satsuki now? ...You'll have to make do. If Nonon doesn't want to come, you can't force her to.

"I... see."

Without exchanging any more words, you put your shoes on, and head out.

As you expected, not thinking about Satsuki in this situation is a bit of a challenge. She's right next to you, after all. At the very least, you make sure to avoid looking at her directly. You don't know what is it that you find so interesting about her body, but you really don't need any of that right now. You don't need it, period.

Are you attracted to girls? Is that why you feel this way? Is that why you kissed her? The only thing you've heard about girls loving other girls is that it's wrong. Is there something wrong with you?

...No! You weren't supposed to think about this at all. None of this matters. She tells you what to do, you do it. Other than that, you keep to yourself. That's it.

Most of the run passes in an uncomfortable silence. Something is urging you to spill your guts to Satsuki, but that would go against what you've promised yourself. You're in control. You don't need-

Lost in your thoughts, you make a single misstep. Crying out in pain, you fall to the ground. Breathing through gritted teeth, you clutch your left foot. Did you break something?

"Ryuuko!", Satsuki calls out. She immediately kneels down next to you. "What's wrong?"

"...It's nothing. I'm fine." You don't need her help. You can get up on your own. You can-
"Ow!" ...You can't.

"Let me see." She carefully slips off your shoe and sock, and takes your foot in her hands, examining it. Even though you're in pain, her fingers are so delicate, nice to the touch...

"It seems you've sprained your ankle.", she concludes.

"...What does that mean?"

"It means you need to rest for two or three days. It's nothing serious, but if you don't let it heal, it might get worse."

That means a setback on your training. On Satsuki's training, as well. And it's your fault. Your exercise in control isn't off to a good start.

"I'm sorry...", you mutter, looking aside.

"You have nothing to apologize for, Ryuuko.", Satsuki says. Why is she using that soft tone again? "Injuries happen."

"But, the training..."

"The training can wait. Preventing lasting injuries takes priority." She throws your arm over her shoulders, and helps you up. "Let's go back."

You want to object, but you can't. With Satsuki so close to you, you forget about the pain completely. This feels so nice, and it's not just because of her touch, either. Satsuki is usually uncompromising, adamant, straight to the point. However, lately, you've been seeing more and more of her softer side. Whenever she shows it to you, you feel like you're going to melt.

As the two of you continue walking, you sigh, and lean your head against her shoulder.

"Are you feeling tired, Ryuuko?"

"Huh?" You raise your head, blushing slightly. You got caught up in the moment. "...Yeah, a bit."

"Don't worry, it's not far now."

You planned on sticking to strictly professional terms with Satsuki, but... you can't bring yourself to do it. She was your first friend, and is probably the most important person in your life. It sounds weird, but that's how you feel about it. Therefore, your "rebellion" didn't even last half a day. In a way, it's because of your currently swollen ankle.

Still, what are you going to do about... that? You can't deny something happened last night, even if you're unsure what it was. You want to ask Satsuki about it, but something is holding you back. Embarrassment? Fear? You don't know. Hopefully, she'll bring it up first.

For now, it looks like you're going to spend much of the next couple days lying down.

Satsuki enters your room, carrying something wrapped in paper towel.

"What's that?"

"Ice,", she answers. "For the swelling."

You groan. You're familiar with this kind of treatment, but definitely not a fan of it.

"It's necessary." She holds down your leg in place with one hand, and presses the bag of ice against your ankle with the other.

You yelp, and goosebumps cover your body. "...It's ice, alright."

After a moment, Satsuki removes the bag from your leg, and leaves to dispose of it.

"Do you need anything, Ryuuko?", she asks, having returned. "You shouldn't move around too much for now. I can bring whatever you need."

"T-thanks, Satsuki.", you stammer. "...I think I'm fine for now, though. Where's Nonon, by the way?"

"She was upset we didn't wake her up, as she wanted to come with us. Thus, she decided to go running with Inumuta. She stormed off before I could tell her what happened."

You chuckle. "She must've been pretty mad if she decided to go with the nerd."

Satsuki smiles a bit at that. "I'll do my best to calm her. You should rest for now."

"...Thanks again, Satsuki."

She turns to leave a room. "...No need to thank me.", she answers quietly. You catch a hint of... blush? No, that can't be. Must be your eyes playing tricks on you.

You make yourself comfortable, and try to sleep. You don't particularly enjoy getting up this early on weekends, after all.

...What if she did blush?

For some reason, caring for Ryuuko feels natural to you. Why? You're not usually one to show kindness. Perhaps spending time with her has changed you? If so, it's not a bad change.

Suddenly, your cellphone buzzes. You check the caller, and your heart immediately falls. It's Ragyou.

You sigh heavily, and answer the call. "This is Satsuki."

"Satsuki, my dear. How's your little project coming along?" Even though she's far away, you feel like taking a step back from the phone.

"There have been no problems.", you answer flatly.

"That's good news.", she says dismissively. "Say, I know I usually tell you beforehand, but perhaps you'd like to visit your old mother for the rest of the weekend? There'll be a chopper waiting for you at the usual spot in an hour."

Why does she bother asking if she's not actually going to give you a choice, you wonder?

"Yes, mother."

"Very good. I'll see you soon, Satsuki." With that, she hangs up.

The phone's screen cracks under your grip. You'll need to get a new one.

That was a nice nap. Unfortunately, the dull pain in your foot reminds you why you got to take it. You readjust it to a more comfortable position.

"Don't kick me, asshole!"

"Huh?" You open your eyes to see Nonon sitting on your bedside. "What are you doing here?"

She hesitates. "I... have nothing better to do, so I'm here."

You smirk. "I never knew you cared."

She looks away. "Hmph."

"So, how was your run?"

"Leaving me alone with that uppity nerd is a bad idea. You two keep that up, and SOMETHING might happen to him." Nonon's eyes give off a sinister glint.

"Trust me, I'd much rather go running with you than have this happen to me. Anyway, where's Satsuki?"

Nonon frowns. "She... had to go home again. Didn't even see her leave, she left me a note."

"...Oh."

Neither of you knows what exactly happens whenever Satsuki goes there, but judging by her reactions, it can't be good.

"The note she's left for me says there's one for you, too.", Nonon says. "Should be under your pillow."

You slide a hand under the pillow, and fumble around. Sure enough, you find a piece of paper underneath. You unfold it, and examine it.

"I'm sorry. -Satsuki", is what the note says, written in Satsuki's unmistakeable near-calligraphic style. You sigh, and put the note on your nightstand. What is she apologizing for? It's not her fault.

You have to endure it. That's what you've been telling yourself, and that's not going to change. Not until you're ready to pay Ragyou back. Not just for this – for everything she's done to you, your father, your nameless little sister, and humanity as a whole. She will pay for all of it, and you'll be there to make sure she does.

Right now, though, you're completely powerless to stop her hands, wandering across your body.

"Is something the matter, Satsuki?", Ragyou asks, leaning in to your ear. "You've been so tense recently. I thought you enjoyed our baths?"

Never. Even before she started doing... this, you've felt uncomfortable around her naked.

"All is well, mother.", you lie. "My body is merely tense due to exercise."

"I see. Yes, that makes sense. But..." Her hands hover over your chest. "I think there's more to it than that – other kinds of tension. You're a growing girl, after all. Rest assured, your mother will help you relieve all of it."

She cups your breasts, and starts massaging them, all the while rubbing your nipples with her fingers. This sensation, this pleasure - it's something that should be enjoyable, but by these hands, it only fills you with anger. Your nipples harden, becoming more sensitive. You hold back a moan, unwilling to give her any more satisfaction. You can't control everything, however. You shiver, and your back arches upwards.

Ragyou lets out an amused hum. "That's it, daughter of mine. Build up tension..."

As she continues to knead your breast with one hand, the other slides down between your legs. Two of her long, slender fingers tease you, sending even more shivers across your body. Ragyou takes your reaction for an invitation, and plunges the fingers inside, causing you to gasp. You bite your lip as the two digits begin their work.

"...And, when it becomes too much to bear..."

Waves of heat course through your body. You close your eyes, as your breathing becomes increasingly ragged. Ragyou... No. The one you want to be with. The one your first kiss belongs to.

"...Let it out all at once."

Ryuuko.

Satsuki.

Even though she's not here, you can't stop thinking about her. Every time she visits her family house, you can't help but worry. However, this time, it's not just that. The kindness she's shown you yesterday, the warm, soft tone of her voice. You wish you'd get to hear that tone more often, and not just when you're injured. And to think you considered distancing yourself from her earlier the very same day. Why would you ever do that?

Thankfully, and surprisingly, Nonon helped you in Satsuki's absence. While she wasn't as nice about it, she did what needed to be done. Your ankle seems to be improving. In fact, it seems it's almost back to normal. Your injuries have always healed pretty fast, so it's not much of a surprise. You should be fine by tomorrow.

For now, you're killing time until Satsuki's return by watching TV. Though, it would probably be more accurately described as "looking in the TV's general direction while thinking of various topics, mostly Satsuki". You can't say you know the name of the currently airing show.

Nonon walks up to you from behind the couch. "Don't you have something better to do?"

"Nope."

"Even with the end of the school year coming up?"

"Oh, that's right. We're gonna take a short break from beating people up in a bit, right?" You give her a wide grin.

She rolls her eyes. "There's more to it than this whole conquest thing. Like actual school stuff, for instance."

You shrug indifferently. "I'll manage."

You're not a star student, but it doesn't take you much effort to get by, which is a good thing, since your training doesn't leave a lot of time for studying. You're probably what people refer

to as an underachiever, especially considering you forcibly skipped a grade. Good thing you make up for that in other aspects.

Nonon sighs. "Whatever. I guess there's more important stuff than that right now."

You nod. "See, now you're getting it."

She moves to the front of the couch. "Move a bit."

In response, you cross your arms in mock indignation. "Can't you see how gravely injured I am? There's a chair over there, two, even."

"If you don't move, I'll sit on you.", she says, slightly annoyed.

Intent on continuing this game, you let out a loud yawn. "So tired...", you mutter, closing your eyes.

As you pretend to sleep, suddenly you feel something pressing down on your lap. Upon opening your eyes, you see Nonon, who delivered on her promise.

"Seriously?"

"I did warn you.", she answers nonchalantly.

You shrug. "Oh, well." Your ankle is untouched, so it doesn't really bother you.

"So, what do you think Honnouji Academy will be like?", she asks.

You raise an eyebrow. "That came out of nowhere."

"Well, it's what we're working towards, isn't it?"

"I guess..." What do you think it will be like? That's a good question, one you admittedly haven't given much thought. "No clue, but if Satsuki is in charge, it can't go wrong."

"We can agree on that.", Nonon answers. "Speaking of Satsuki... lately, it seems like those visits have been bothering her less. Did you talk about it to her, or something?"

You shudder ever so slightly. You know exactly why that is. Should you tell her?

...No, it's best not to. If Satsuki wanted her to know, she wouldn't be so secretive about it. Besides, you're not sure if you want her to know yourself.

You shake your head. "Nope. It still doesn't look like she wants to talk about it. Did you try?"

Nonon looks down. "...I stopped trying a while ago. She clams up every time I ask."

Your conversation is cut short by Nonon's ringtone which is, of course, a classical tune. She

checks the caller, and immediately answers, excited.

"Satsuki?! Are you coming back yet?" She listens for a while, and her face turns sullen again. "...Oh. Okay..."

"What's the matter?", you ask.

"...Satsuki will be coming back late. She told us not to wait for her to return, since tomorrow's a Monday."

You sigh. "Wanna wait for her anyway?"

"That goes without saying. She'll probably be upset if we do, though. She did tell us to go to bed."

"...I suppose." You sit up, and get on eye level with Nonon. "I know you're really enjoying yourself here, but I want to get up."

While you did go to bed, you can't bring yourself to actually sleep. If Satsuki is staying there for longer, she'll probably be feeling that much worse. Besides, you miss her. You don't want to wait until morning to see her again. Never before were you so actively looking forward to her arrival. You want to talk to her, even though you don't know what you're going to say. You just want to spend time with her. All the time.

That's why you wait, lying in your bed, and staring intently at the bottom of your room's door, hoping light will shine through any moment. It looks like it's going to take a while, though. You wait an hour, two - all the while getting increasingly drowsy. Well, she did say she'd be late. Maybe you should just sleep. You can talk to her tomorrow-

You suddenly hear the apartment door quietly unlock and open. There are no footsteps, however. That's Satsuki, alright. Since she expects you to be asleep, you're not going to go out and greet her. Instead, you'll wait for her to come here. She always does after those visits.

After a long while, you hear her leave the bathroom. It might just be your impatience, but it seemed like she took an awful lot of time to shower. Your door's handle moves, and... stops, before returning to its default position. She's... not coming in? Why? Maybe she forgot something? You opt to wait a bit more.

However, after the light switches off, and you hear no more sounds from behind the door, you can't help but think she decided to go to her own room instead. Why? Did something bad happen? Is she upset about the kiss? Does she... not want to sleep in your bed anymore? No, that can't be true, can it? She was so nice to you yesterday, so caring...

Why didn't she come this time?

You want her to be next to you here. You want to feel the warmth of her body next to yours. You want to talk to her while the two of you are like this. And, even though, or rather especially because it's never happened thus far, you want to wake up with her next to you.

But, you can't. She's not here right now.

Perhaps this time, you should be next to her?

She'll probably chase you out, but you need to at least try. You leave your room, as silently as your ankle allows you, and approach Satsuki's door. As soon as you touch the handle, doubt washes over you. Why are you doing this, exactly? Because you want her to feel better, or because you want to feel better yourself? If she's troubled for some reason, won't intruding on her privacy upset her even more?

Wait, she must've hesitated for some reason at your door, too. You shouldn't be doing the same thing. You told yourself you have to try, and you've come this far. There's no turning back now. You take a deep breath, and step inside Satsuki's room. You're trying your best to remain calm, but your racing heart is not having any of it. Slowly and quietly, you approach the bed.

Confirming that Satsuki is asleep does not make you any more calm. As you get closer, you start trembling. How will she react? Suppressing the urge to turn back, you sit on the side of the bed, and carefully lie down next to Satsuki.

"Ryuuko."

Your heart skips a beat, and you almost jump in surprise. "S-Satsuki?! Y-you're awake? I'm s-sorry, I'll leave-"

She grabs your arm tightly. "Don't. ...Please, don't."

"...Huh?"

"I didn't come to you because I thought you wouldn't want me to. But... I'm glad you came here instead."

She thought the same thing about you as you did about her?

"I... missed you, Satsuki.", you say with some difficulty.

She tightens her grip on your arm. "I missed you too, Ryuuko. ...I missed you so much."

"...Me in specific? What about Nonon? She missed you, too."

"Don't get me wrong, I missed you both.", Satsuki answers. "But..."

"But?"

"I..." She sighs, and lets go of your arm. "...It's nothing. I'm just glad to be back."

"I see..." What was it that she wanted to say there?

"Enough about me.", she says. "How are you feeling? Is your ankle healing well?"

"It should be fine by tomorrow, thanks to you, and Nonon."

"I'm glad to hear that."

This tone. It's the one you've been yearning to hear again. Warm, caring. It feels like it should be reserved for somebody closer to her than you. Come to think of it, how close are you to her? Nonon has known her for longer, but you're the one she seems to rely on whenever something's bothering her. Are you close friends, then?

...Are you just friends?

You turn to look at Satsuki, discovering that she's already looking at you.

"Satsuki... are we friends?", you ask.

Your question confuses her. "...Of course. You said that yourself a while ago, didn't you?"

"...Yeah. But, what happened after that..." You feel your face turn red. "Do friends normally do that?"

Satsuki blushes slightly, as well. However, she maintains eye contact. It feels like you could get lost in those eyes of hers.

"I... don't think they do.", she answers.

Somehow, the distance between the two of you seems to be slowly decreasing. It's only when your noses touch that you flinch in surprise slightly. However, some force drags you back towards each other. You can smell the minty scent of the shampoo Satsuki used, and feel her quickened breath against your skin. The sound of your wildly thumping heart fills your ears.

The previous two were just practice for this - the real deal. This is your first real kiss. And it feels like one. Satsuki's heavenly lips are pressing against yours, and you're responding in kind. As if automatically, you embrace each other in a hug to complete the kiss. All of your stress, doubts, and other thoughts fade away. Only this wonderful feeling remains. It's not a weird one at all.

It's love.

This state of bliss continues for a long while. You wish it would last forever. You feel like the two of you could melt together into a single being, then and there. That wouldn't be bad at all. You can't do that, though, can you?

You slowly, reluctantly pull away from the kiss. Why does Satsuki seem sad?

"I'm sorry...", she mutters. "I forced you into this, didn't I?"

You raise your eyebrows. "...Huh? I should be the one apologizing. I took ages to figure out how I feel about you, that is..." You're pretty sure your face turned crimson. "I... think I love you."

Tears start forming in Satsuki's eyes as she tightens her embrace. "There's nothing wrong with that. I... feel the same way about you, Ryuuko." She leans in to whisper in your ear. "Thank you."

Guess you really aren't friends.

Fondness. Affection. Love. There aren't really that many words to describe this feeling. Regardless, it's what you feel towards Satsuki. What's more, it's what she feels towards you, as well. You couldn't possibly ask for more.

The first night after realizing this, you slept huddled together closer than ever before. You've never slept this well, even though you didn't want to. As tired as you were, you wanted to stay awake, and cherish every second spent in a tight embrace with Satsuki. With... your girlfriend? No, that word seems weak, non-committal. You want your relationship to be more than that.

If it wasn't before, now it definitely is your favorite time of the day. Exhausted after the training, you spend some time sitting together before heading home, leaning against each other.

"I hope you understand why we're keeping this between the two of us, Ryuuko.", Satsuki suddenly sounds off.

You look up at her, your head rested on her shoulder. "Because Nonon would lose it if she knew?"

"While I would prefer us to take our time with telling Nonon about this, that's not the main issue. The main issue is..." Her expression darkens, and she reinforces her grip on your hand. "...my mother."

"Why?", you ask, raising your head to look at her directly. "I mean, I know she's evil and stuff, but... doesn't she think you're doing what she wants you to? Why would she have a

problem with us dating?"

Satsuki shakes her head, and gives you a grim smile. "Oh no, she wouldn't have a problem with it at all. She would likely throw a party in our honor immediately. Right now, she pays you little to no mind. If she was to know, she would be watching your every step, as well as watching mine even more closely. It's dangerous."

"I see..." You rest your head on her shoulder again. "Sorry you have to put up with all this, Satsuki."

She suddenly leans in to peck your cheek. "Don't be. I wouldn't have met you otherwise."

"...Thanks, but I don't think I'm worth it.", you mutter, as a blush appears on your face. "I'm just-"

A finger placed on your lips silences you. "You are, Ryuuko. You really are."

The ubiquitous cherry petals are extremely cliche, but they do set a certain unique mood for the occasion, year after year. With the second year of middle school over with, you're one step closer to reaching your goal.

"See? I told you I'd manage.", Ryuuko says with a confident grin.

Nonon rolls her eyes. "You're either smarter than you look, or lucky as hell, and somehow I doubt it's the former."

"As long as I pass without a problem, I don't really care how it happens."

"That's not the right attitude to have.", you chime in. "You should try harder, Ryuuko. You can't leave it all up to luck."

Ryuuko groans. "Come on, Satsuki, does it really matter?"

"It does. Our preparations are not all about physical training. Intellectual stimulation is necessary, as well. Nonon understands that necessity." Nonon puffs out her chest in pride at your comment. "You should, as well."

"...Yes, ma'am."

She looks cute when she's pouting. You hold back the urge to hug her, and clear your throat. "That aside, I'd like to tell you something. I'll be leaving for the entirety of spring break."

The two give you concerned looks. "...You'll be visiting home this whole time?", Ryuuko asks.

Nonon clings to your arm. "Do you really have to go?"

Though they have no idea why you're anxious about visiting Ragyou, they're still concerned. You really wish you could tell them, but it would only make matters worse.

"I will not be visiting the manor this time.", you answer.

Their expressions shift from worry to curiosity. "Then, where are you going?"

You only smile in response.

"Then, you're saying you don't need me to come there?"

"It's my pet project, mother. I want to see it through from beginning to end by myself.", you answer. "I wouldn't want to waste your time with things I can handle on my own."

"You're growing up so fast, Satsuki..." Ragyou's voice assumes a forced dreamy tone. "Very well. I will leave this to your discretion. It will be a good test of your abilities."

"Thank you, mother." That's the first battle won. The war has only begun, however.

At this point in time, Honnouji Academy and the surrounding city exist mostly on the head architect's plans. But, in one year's time, this huge mound of dirt in the middle of Tokyo Bay will become your fortress. To ensure that happens, you dedicate the entire spring break to coordinating the work. There is no room for chaos on this island. Not a single building will be placed here without your approval. Not even in the slums.

During the short downtimes you allow yourself, your thoughts wander. Mostly towards Ryuuko. As happy as you are to be with her, you can't help but worry. Can you give her the love she deserves? Are you not perhaps just selfishly using her as means of comfort?

"You seem troubled, milady." Soroi pulls you away from your ponderings, bringing you a fresh cup of tea, which you gladly accept.

"There's more to be done here than I expected.", you answer. "It's a bit taxing."

"I assumed it was a more personal matter.", he says. "Lady Ryuuko, perhaps?"

You almost drop the teacup as a chill runs down your spine. "S-Soroi, how did you- ?!"

A smile appears on the old butler's face. "Picking up on small cues is part of my job, Lady Satsuki. For a trained eye, it's not hard to notice the way you've been looking at each other lately. I'm glad to see you've found happiness."

You sigh. You should've known better than to try hiding something from him. "...I'm scared, Soroi. Scared of hurting her. She trusts me, but do I deserve that trust?"

"The fact you're afraid of hurting Lady Ryuuko shows you care about her. She realizes that, and that's why she trusts you.", Soroi answers. "Or that's what it seems, at least. What would an old man like me know about romance between two young girls?"

You smile. "Evidently more than me. Thank you, Soroi. I'm sorry for bothering you with this nonsense."

"It's hardly nonsense, milady. Matters of the heart are not to be taken lightly."

"...I wish I had more time to indulge in them. That's another reason to carry out this plan, I suppose.", you conclude, and finally take a sip of your tea. It's gotten a bit cold.

You're bored. But at least, you're not worried this time. Curious, rather. Where could she have gone? Your future wife. You giggle to yourself at the thought. It's way too early to think about things like that, and yet you can't help but feel that's how it's going to be. It's great to have somebody- no, to have Satsuki so close to your heart.

While your physical attraction to her is a fairly new thing, it's safe to say you were already enchanted with her as a person for a good while now. Recent events merely helped you make sense of it all. Her charismatic personality, paired with her softer, kind side make her irresistible.

"What are you chuckling to yourself about?", Nonon asks, unceremoniously seating herself on top of you, again. "Have you gone crazy with boredom already?"

"And when did you make a habit out of using me as a couch?", you bite back.

She shrugs. "Well, the real one is usually occupied. I have to make do with what's available."

"…You mean like those chairs over there?"

"They're not nearly as comfortable.", she answers with a devilish grin.

You sigh. "Well, hope you don't mind if your couch snores, because other than bored, I'm also tired. Some of us work hard to keep in shape, you know. "

"You don't snore." Nonon suddenly covers her mouth near the end of the sentence.

"…How do you know that? The walls here are pretty thick."

"…I-I know because…" She hesitates. "…Because Satsuki sometimes asks me to check on you in the morning! That's right! How did you think I know, dumbass?!"

You raise your hands in a sign of surrender. "Settle down, I was just asking. That makes sense." What was up with her reaction, though?

Nonon breathes in and out heavily, calming herself. "…Good. Stop asking stupid questions."

Looks like she's not in the mood to talk anymore, but she doesn't seem eager to leave, either. You shrug, and close your eyes. At the very least, it's good to know you don't snore. Satsuki probably wouldn't tell you if you did.

All things considered, you appreciate Nonon's company. While she isn't Satsuki, to put it bluntly, she's somebody you consider to be a good friend, even if your interactions might not look like it.

Something feels off. Your torso seems a bit... heavier. You open your eyes, to see Nonon fast asleep on top of you. She's resting her head on your chest, and seems to be sleeping peacefully. Glancing at the light outside the window, it seems some time has passed.

"Again, really?"

She frowns in her slumber, and slowly awakens.

"You enjoying yourself there?", you ask.

She smirks. "There isn't much to rest my head on."

"...Don't make me push you off." Satsuki rubbing the fact in your face by simply looking the way she does is enough.

Nonon rests her head again, and changes her smirk to a sweet smile. "You wouldn't."

You return her smile. "You're right, I wouldn't.", you answer, petting her head. "You awoke my maternal instincts." Your smile becomes a wide grin.

"...Shut the hell up."

Nonon lying on top of you doesn't really do the same things to your mind as Satsuki would. She just is there. It's nice to spend time this way with somebody you know well, but it's not anywhere near the bliss you get from embracing the one you love. It's a good thing you finally have a decent grasp on your feelings.

Come to think of it, your relationship with Satsuki, combined with the hours upon hours of your training together, made you more comfortable with physical contact with others. The several years of school preceding your first meeting have caused you to erect a thick barrier of personal space around yourself, one you thought you'd probably never fully lower. In the end, it melted like butter faced with affection from her.

"You know, I thought I'd get a funnier reaction out of you.", Nonon says.

"I'm fine with it, as long as you don't make fun of my big breasts."

She raises her brows. "...Big breasts?"

"They're big. Just not yet. You'll see.", you answer, brimming with confidence.You actually just made that up.

Nonon snorts in amusement. "I'll remind you about this in a couple years."

Satsuki's return was as mysterious as the departure. She dodges any questions related to it with a mysterious smile. At the very least, it looks like there's nothing to be worried about in this case. With the spring break over, your final year in middle school is here. Contrary to what Satsuki said before, it seems academics are not going to be the main concern. There's still some schools to subjugate.

"Come to think of it, why do we travel to those schools by train every time?", you ask Satsuki, sitting opposite of you. As much as you'd like to sit beside her and rest your head in her lap, others are around.

"To keep a low profile.", she answers. "It seems that somebody is already on our track. Traveling by helicopter wouldn't help."

"Makes sense, I guess..." Doesn't make it any less boring, though.

"On that topic, I think I've figured out who those people are.", Inumuta announces, after a long while of typing.

"Took you long enough.", Nonon grumbles.

"Let's hear it.", Satsuki says.

Inumuta adjusts his glasses. "They call themselves "Northern Kanto Gang Leader Alliance". As the name suggests, they are an alliance of various delinquent groups from schools in northern Kanto."

"That explains some things.", you chime in. "Like why they started attacking us. The only schools left to conquer are in the north."

Satsuki nods. "Inumuta, can you find any more information on them?"

"Only something about their leader.", he answers. "His name is Sanageyama Uzu. He is supposedly responsible for single-handedly subjugating all of those gangs, and uniting them under his rule."

"Interesting. Then, we will be getting off at the nearest station, and going back."

Satsuki's words confuse everybody else, yourself included.

"Huh?", is all you can manage. The thought that she's afraid of this Sanageyama guy crosses

your mind, but only briefly. Satsuki is the last person you'd suspect of running away from a fight.

"...What about that school we were headed to?", Nonon asks.

"The way I see it, all of the remaining schools are under this alliance's rule.", Satsuki explains. "Taking it out would save us a lot of effort." The corners of her mouth curve upwards into her usual devious smirk. "Therefore, I'm going to challenge Sanageyama Uzu to a battle. What better way to bring down an organization built around him is there?"

"Cutting off the head of the snake? A wise tactic.", Gamagoori pipes up.

"I don't think I like this metaphor.", Nonon mutters.

The response to Satsuki's challenge was swift. Sanageyama accepted the challenge without question, and designated a meeting point, a field in the middle of nowhere.

Sanageyama doesn't look so impressive in person. He's pretty short for a guy. The shirt reading "Bad Boy" in English doesn't help, either. It seems he makes up for his shortcomings with confidence, though.

"I'm getting awful grade school vibes from this guy.", you mumble to Nonon.

"Sounds like your kind of company."

You fake a sad tone. "Your words cut like a knife, Nonon."

"Burn like snake venom.", she corrects you. "But yeah, he looks like he stole his big brother's clothes."

Gamagoori suddenly stands behind the two of you, appearing even larger than usual. "Matoi, Jakuzure. This isn't the time for your senseless banter."

"I'm Northern Kanto Gang Leader Alliance Representative, Sanageyama Uzu!", he exclaims. "You have guts to challenge me to a fight, Kiryuuin!"

You can't help but wonder if his confidence stems from his skills, or the fact he has three hundred delinquents backing him. Satsuki's challenge specifically instructed him to bring as many of them as possible.

"I did not come here to fight you.", Satsuki answers. "I expect you to surrender." Cool as ever.

Her words anger Sanageyama's entourage enough to take initiative. "Who the hell does she think she's messing with?!"

Three hundred is a big number. It seems even bigger when referring to the amount of burly guys with sharp objects currently charging at Satsuki. Somehow, you're not really concerned for her, though. Against goons like these, her sheer willpower is enough. Sanageyama remains unfazed, however.

"Impressive. But, this kind of trick won't work on me!"

He draws his shinai, and immediately starts running towards Satsuki, who remains motionless. You already know what's going to happen. It's barely noticable, but her whole body tenses up in a preparatory motion. As Sanageyama tries for a leaping attack, Satsuki releases the stored up energy in the form of a powerful thrust with her sheathed sword, which... misses?!

"What the-?!", you let out.

No, it didn't miss. He saw through it, and dodged it! Sanageyama lands behind Satsuki, and rapidly turns towards her, preparing a thrust of his own.

"You're mine!"

He might take her out. You tighten your grip on Kaizan. You need to-

"Did you think you've managed to get behind me?"

Before you manage to finish your first step towards her, Satsuki drives Bakuzan's scabbard into Sanageyama's abdomen, without even looking back. The hit is hard enough for him to drop his bamboo sword, and drop to the knees. You and the other three watch the scene in awe. She didn't need your help, after all.

"Come.", Satsuki says. "I will provide you with a stage where you can unleash your full power - the place known as Honnouji Academy."

Sanageyama accepted Satsuki's offer under one condition: that he would be given time to prepare the alliance for his departure. Despite its defeat at Satsuki's hand, the alliance didn't just vanish into thin air. By her decision, it will continue to exist.

During your training today, the two of you spend the whole allotted time attempting to replicate the ability Sanageyama has. You find it really difficult to focus on tiny preparatory motions to this extent in the middle of battle, though. Guess he's got talent.

"A diamond in the rough, huh?", you ask. "I hope he's not my replacement."

Satsuki glares at you. "Don't even joke about that, Ryuuko." She slowly, delicately presses her lips against yours, and stays that way for a while. "Nobody can replace you."

"...Thanks." Her compliments never fail to make you blush. You might've said that just to get

one. "Still, what made you want to recruit him? That ability he has?"

"Precisely. He doesn't match you in pure combat skill or talent, but this unique trait he has could help him get far. I only hope it won't get to his head. Skill comes from hard work, not just aptitude."

You nod in understanding. The two of you know the truthfulness of this statement very well. "So, now that this whole conquest thing is done, what's next?"

Satsuki shakes her head. "It isn't yet done. We have merely sown the seeds, so to speak. Now it's time to reap the harvest - Honnouji Academy needs students."

You sit in her lap sideways, and wrap your arms around her. "So, there's still no time to rest for a bit?", you ask, slightly disappointed. "I was hoping we'd be able to catch up for the lost spring break..."

"Unfortunately, there's still a lot to be done. I, too, wish we had more time for each other. I'll make it up to you at the soonest occasion. I promise."

The kiss you share afterwards is almost enough to cover for all that.

Other than the ongoing recruitment drive, there is another thing that needs preparing. It won't truly be ready until after you've arrived at Honnouji, though.

"Hello? Who is this?"

"Iori. It's me.", you answer. "I trust you remember our agreement?"

"Lady Satsuki. Naturally. My uncle has been keeping me up to speed. I am ready whenever."

"Very good. That time is now, then. The Sewing Club's laboratory is ready. All it needs is staff."

Iori's voice fills with enthusiasm. "Excellent. I will be there by tomorrow. Preparations will take some time, after all. I'm afraid I don't know anybody who could assist me, however."

"We're working on that part. I'm sure we won't find anyone of your caliber, but I'm confident some suitable assistants will be there."

"Thank you, Lady Satsuki. It will be good to see you again."

Iori Shirou, Soroi's nephew, was something of your childhood friend back in the day. Those were simpler days. As it later turned out, he has a knack for tailoring, and an interest in Life Fibers. He's exactly the kind of person you need right now.

Though he can't see it, you smile. "Likewise. It's been a while. ...One more thing."

"Yes?"

"It will be still some time until then, but we're going to need prototypes for those uniforms. I believe my companions to be suitable subjects for setting the upper limits."

"Of course.", Iori says. "...In the meantime, I'll also try to come up with a name for them."

"I'm sure it will be fitting."

Life Fibers. Thread-like parasitic alien organisms, which can be woven into clothes. Those clothes give the host's abilities a boost, in exchange for feeding on their nervous system's bioelectricity. If you stop and think about it, the whole thing is absolutely ridiculous. That's none of your concern, though. It's what you have to work with.

On that note, the laboratory is certainly impressive. All of the gear is top of the line. With enough qualified staff, you could produce vast amounts of high quality clothing on a short notice. Even by yourself you can create specialized custom outfits with ease here.

But, before any of that happens, you need to determine what you will be producing, exactly. The idea Satsuki had was that, since Japanese school uniforms are based on military outfits, Honnouji Academy's uniforms will be designed for combat, utilizing Life Fibers to enhance the wearer's abilities.

There is, however, a problem. If not used carefully, Life Fibers can have a multitude of adverse effects on the host's body, including death. Every person's resistance to those effects is different, but the general rule is that it peaks in late teenage years, and decreases to miniscule amounts afterwards. It's a major reason why Honnouji Academy is pivotal to Satsuki's plans. Only Life Fibers can defeat Life Fibers, and so, high school years are the best time to strike.

You will need to determine the safe Life Fiber amounts for those uniforms. From the (admittedly extremely risky and reckless) tests you've ran on yourself, you know that your body can comfortably handle a concentration of around 30%. That's data with no frame of reference, however. You don't know how your resistance relates to the average. That's the main reason why your work is at a standstill right now.

"You seem to be stuck.", a voice echoes across the lab.

"Who's there?!" You frantically look around for the source. There isn't supposed to be anybody but you here. Your gaze stops at the computer screen in front of you, where a bespectacled face is displayed. "How?! This network is tightly secured!"

The blue haired intruder smirks. "I know. I was the one who created it."

"...Who are you?"

"Inumuta Houka.", he answers. "Kiryuuin Satsuki told me an acquaintance of hers would be here, and that I should get in touch with him. I take it that's you?"

"Iori Shirou, yes. You know Satsuki... Lady Satsuki?" This might take a while to get used to.

Inumuta adjusts his glasses' frames. "Well, she hunted me down to ask me to join her cause. I've been handling data for her ever since. I'd say I know her, yes."

You sigh. "...That sounds like something she would do."

"Then, care to explain what your job here will be?"

"Creating the ultimate school uniforms." You gasp. "Wait... ultimate school uniforms... ultimate uniforms... Ultima Uniforms!"

Well, it seems that part is covered already.

The last year of middle school has been a weird one for you. It's as if some plug was suddenly pulled, and you started growing rapidly. Your whole body began turning from that of a girl, into one of a woman. You actually had to start wearing bras, and change their cup sizes several times in this short timespan.

It's not just bras, either. Your whole wardrobe needed frequent changes. While you used to be around a full head shorter than Satsuki, you quickly caught up to her, and now you're more or less equal. The changes your body has been undergoing lately have not gone unnoticed by others.

"Why are you not sleeping yet, Satsuki?", you ask.

"I don't want to take my eyes off you.", she answers, smirking. "You just might get more beautiful in the moment I'm not looking. You're sneaky like that."

You blush, and break off eye contact. "Stop it..."

She puts her hand on your cheek. "There is nothing shameful in it, Ryuuko. You are blossoming wonderfully. I'm glad I'm getting to witness this change."

You wish you were this good with putting your affection into words. You find Satsuki more alluring than ever before, but... in a different way. Her face may be beautiful, but her body is a feast for the eyes. While you shot forward only recently, she's been maturing gradually for a good while now. Naturally, you're no match for her. Her chest is bigger, her hips more shapely, her legs more slender... not to mention the way it all beautifully comes together with her subtle muscle definition. If asked for an example of a godlike body, you'd look no further than to Kiryuuin Satsuki.

Still... you don't have the courage to take your relationship further. Hell, you don't even know how you would go about doing that. Enjoying the feeling of her perfect body pressing against yours is the most you dare to do. You love Satsuki, and don't want to endanger your relationship for a feeling only loosely related to love. You will wait until she decides to take a step forward. If she never does, neither will you.

But, as you like to remind her during trainings, you're not made of steel. All of this leaves you with... an itch. That's the closest word that comes to your mind. All those little moments - when you clash fiercely during training, smelling her sweat, when she turns in her sleep, and unwittingly squeezes her breasts together, when she kisses you... All of them fuel this itch of yours. Eventually, it subsides, but never truly disappears.

Your work as a Nudist Beach operative has been fairly straightforward so far. Your only task is monitoring Matoi Ryuuko's activities, without being detected by her, or the elements surrounding her. The "elements" in question being Kiryuuin Satsuki. Effectively, you're watching over both of them, as the two girls are the best of friends, and are almost always together. It feels like both of them are your nieces, not just one.

How does Matoi Isshin intend to act in light of this fact, you wonder? His daughter has become a trusted companion of his archenemy's child, who appears to be obedient to her mother. Even so, he seems to be completely calm about the situation. The old man must have some kind of plan. Will his daughter like it, though?

Regardless, if your intel is right, your work environment will soon get a lot less forgiving. Little miss Satsuki is building a high school of her very own, running on her terms. Whatever her intents in doing that might be (finding that out will be another assignment of yours) it will be a lot more difficult to remain undetected.

"Unless...", you mumble to yourself, before snapping your fingers in realization. "That's right!"

You rush to your wardrobe, and quickly piece together a basic outfit. A simple shirt, a pair of black pants, and a matching tie. You put on your favorite sunglasses, and ruffle your hair a bit. Something is still missing. A different posture, personality. You slouch a little, and groan like an old man tired with life.

Mikisugi Aikurou, an ordinary teacher in Honnouji Academy, secretly a Nudist Beach spy, sent to uncover the Kiryuuins' plans. That will be your new identity, all of it. For as long as

you act as if you don't know that they know, you should be fine. Kiryuuin Satsuki wouldn't pass up on an opportunity of having a convenient lead at arm's length, after all.

"That's this over with, I guess?", you conclude, as you leave Rinne-dou . The encounter with Sanageyama and your growth spurt are about the only memorable things about this year.

"How sentimental of you.", Nonon sneers.

You shrug. "Well, it's not like we're leaving anything of value behind here."

"Precisely.", Satsuki says. "Everything and everyone of value is coming with us, to Honnouji Academy."

"I haven't heard this one in three years. What is this "Honnouji Academy", exactly?"

"You shall soon see."

"And it's a sight to behold, I must say.", Inumuta chimes in.

You and Nonon fix your glares on Satsuki. "You showed it to him, but not us?!"

"Inumuta's skills were necessary during construction. And by "soon", I mean today. There's a helicopter waiting for us ahead, with Gamagoori and Sanageyama already on board."

That's a bit faster than you expected. Still, you would be lying if you said you're not excited. The flight seems awfully long to you.

"So, where is it?", you ask.

"It's located in Tokyo Bay.", Satsuki answers.

"Like, on the shore?"

She smiles. "Not exactly."

Where else can it be? Underwater? You continue looking out the window, idly tapping your fingers against the armrest of your seat. Eventually, the general area of Tokyo comes into sight. Last time you were here was in elementary school, which was located on the city's outskirts. It's bustling with life, as you remember, but a bit too busy for your liking. You've grown used to the (relatively) countryside location you've spent the last 3 years in.

Something is off. There's an island in the middle of the bay. You don't recall it being there. You squint, hoping to see more. A lot of buildings of varying size are spiralling upwards, leading to a single, huge structure at the top. Its shape reminds you of... a sailor uniform?

"Satsuki, that's not..."

"It is."

"Awesome." That would be a good moment to make out. Shame about all the people here.

The remaining uninformed three glue their eyes to the windows, as well. Expressions of amazement take up the rest of the flight, which doesn't take much longer. You touch down in the courtyard, as "the helipad is still receiving finishing touches", as Satsuki said. What kind of school even has a helipad? Well, that's a stupid question. Honnouji Academy does.

It looks even more majestic up close. The whole school building seems to be designed to impress, intimidate, and be functional, all at the same time. However, Satsuki doesn't give you much time to take in the sights.

"I'm sure all of you would like to give everything a closer look, but before that, there is something that requires your attention.", she says, leading you inside the main building. Just how many students can this thing accommodate?

"And what would that be, if I may ask?", Gamagoori inquires.

Satsuki stops right before a row of elevators, and turns on her heel with a clack.

"You are all aware of what Life Fibers are. They are our enemy's primary tool. Only Life Fibers can defeat Life Fibers. Trying to deny this would be foolish. In that case, to even the odds, we will make them our tool, as well. "

"Make them our tool, how?", Sanageyama asks.

"With Ultima Uniforms. A line of specialized combat uniforms outfitted with Life Fibers, manufactured by Honnouji Academy, for its students. The five of you are my elite, each handpicked for your own, unique reasons. You will participate in a test, which will help finalize the uniforms' designs." Satsuki turns towards the elevators. "An acquaintance of mine, in charge of Honnouji Academy's Sewing Club, will explain the rest."

All of this sounds intriguing, to say the least. Combat uniforms using Life Fibers? A test? The six of you enter one of the spacious elevators, and ride all the way down, to a floor which appears to be deep underground. Your first thought is that it looks like some mad scientist's lab. Do mad scientists have giant sewing machines in their labs, though?

Satsuki continues to lead you further in, until you reach what appears to be the central part of the lab. In it, a person is waiting for you. A girl... or a guy? Long, wavy, blond hair, glasses, an androgynous face and figure. You seriously can't tell.

"So, that's the Student Council-to-be." Sounds like a guy.

"This is Iori Shirou.", Satsuki says. "He will be the Sewing Club's president, and right now,

will conduct the test." A guy, then.

"What will this test entail?", Inumuta asks.

Iori clears his throat. "As Lady Satsuki likely already told you, my job is designing, producing, and maintaining Ultima Uniforms, among other Life Fiber-related activities. What you will participate in right now is a test which will determine your level of resistance to Life FIbers. The average high schooler can comfortably endure a Life Fiber concentration of around fifteen percent in their clothes. Obviously, I expect more from each of you."

You scratch your head. "So, how will you test that?"

"With these." He walks up to a nearby clothing rack, and removes one outfit from it. The general design is that of a bluish sailor uniform, though it seems to be a pretty rough example. The stitching is visible, especially in the large "10" sewn onto the front. "Prototype uniforms, with their Life Fibers constantly active."

"Not the greatest needlework I've ever seen.", Nonon comments. You are inclined to agree.

Iori briefly glares daggers at her. "It's made with a specific function in mind: prototyping. It's not supposed to look nice. Regardless, the "10" here stands for the percentage of Life Fibers contained in it. You will try these on, in intervals of ten percent. All the while, your vital signs will be monitored, and that way, we'll determine the upper limit of Life Fiber concentration you can handle. Though I don't expect to use most of them, I've created test outfits up to ninety percent, out of principle."

"That's a waste of Life Fibers, Iori.", Satsuki says. "We won't have to worry about shortages, but I would prefer that we use our supplies wisely."

"Not to worry, Lady Satsuki.", he assures her. "Once testing is over, I will take all of those apart, and reuse the threads. Life Fibers are very malleable."

She nods. "Very well. Let's begin, then."

Iori clasps his hands. "Any volunteers to go first?"

Before anyone else can, Gamagoori immediately steps forward. Iori shows him to some kind of scanning chamber, bringing a rack of male uniforms along.

"Start with ten percent."

Gamagoori complies, and quickly puts on the uniform. It's obviously several sizes too small for him, but he somehow manages.

Iori analyzes the readouts on his computer carefully. "Everything in order. Alright, move on to twenty."

For the next two uniforms, the results are identical. Seems Gamagoori can take a fair bit more

than your average person.

"Impressive. I don't expect to get any further here, but we should at least try the forty percent uniform."

There seems to be something off with this one, though. As soon as Gamagoori puts it on, he starts acting oddly. His brows are twitching, and you can see his fingers trembling slightly.

"Quickened heart rate, elevated body temperature... No, that's too much. Take it off!", Iori calls out. "Thirty percent will be the safe threshold for you. Still more than I expected."

One after another, the others enter the chamber, with similar results. Somehow, you end up being the last. You gulp audibly. It would be embarrassing if your resistance turned out to be lower than everyone else's.

You enter the chamber, take the first uniform from the rack, and try it on. It feels surprisingly comfortable for something this crude. This feeling is somehow familiar. You've worn clothes like this before.

"Vital signs normal, carry on.", Iori says.

To your relief, you can pull off the next two uniforms just fine. They don't really feel much different from each other.

"The other four couldn't handle the forty percent uniform, so you most likely won't, either. Still, the test wouldn't be complete if you didn't give it a try."

This one's making you feel a bit anxious. The others' reactions to wearing it didn't look promising. You take a deep breath, and try the outfit on.

"...Feels the same.", you conclude. It's not painful, or otherwise uncomfortable.

Iori blinks. "Huh. That's new. I suppose that means we should continue."

The others are impressed by your feat. You even earn yourself a slight smile from Satsuki. However, their expressions falter as you continue successfully donning the uniforms.

"What? They're just clothes.", you say, as you change from eighty to ninety percent. "Don't know what the fuss was about."

You are, however, confused by this. How come others reacted this way? You don't feel any different by wearing any of those. Are you weird in some way?

Upon trying on the last outfit without issue, you leave the scanning chamber. All eyes are on you, and all of them are wide. Not a comfortable feeling.

"Y-you... there must be some kind of mistake, some glitch in the equipment...", Iori mutters, half to you, half to himself. "That's impossible..."

"Well, I put them on, didn't I?", you ask. "Not much room for error there. By the way, Satsuki, aren't you gonna try too?"

She steps forward. "I am, actually."

Iori looks on as she makes her way towards the chamber. "...Lady Satsuki?"

"I'll make it quick, Iori.", she says. "I'll only put on the last uniform."

"No, that's too risky! Lady Satsuki, if you are going to take the test, please, do it gradually!"

"I see no point in wasting time. If she can do it, so can I." Her tone is oddly cold. Did you... hurt her pride, somehow?

"You sure about this, Satsuki?", you ask.

She turns to give you a stony look, but is unable to maintain it for long. "...Don't worry. I'll be fine."

She steps inside, immediately takes the ninety percent uniform from the rack, and starts changing into it from her old middle school outfit. Finally, she stands upright, and looks at Iori.

"Well?"

Her face doesn't betray the slightest sign of distress or fatigue. Seems like she did it. You sigh in relief.

"It seems that your vital signs are in order, however-"

However, something happens, interrupting Iori mid-sentence. Blue light starts seeping through the stitches in Satsuki's uniform.

"No, no! Take it off immediately!", Iori yells.

She attempts to do so, to no avail. The fabric seems tightly attached to her skin. Suddenly, in addition to light, the outfit starts emitting star-shaped glimmers. For a moment, you can see fear on Satsuki's face, and your heart skips a beat. Immediately afterwards, the chamber's window is bathed in strong blue light, and the monitoring apparatus explodes.

Through the thick glass, you can hear Satsuki scream.

Your head starts to spin, and you feel incredibly sick. This can't be happening for real. It must be a dream. Satsuki can't really be in danger.

"Don't just stand around! Go bring paramedics, all of you!", Iori yells. "I'll try to fix this!"

She is. She really is. And you have to help her. Protect her. Save her. Now.

Iori looks on as you approach the chamber door. "What do you think you're doing, Matoi?!"

"I'm going in there."

"That's a terrible idea. The energies released in there would tear you apart! We need to wait for-"

"I'm. Going. In. There.", you repeat. "I have a high resistance, I'll be fine. Open the door."

He sighs heavily. "...I won't stop you, but you need to understand one thing. You will die in there."

You look him dead in the eye. "If living means letting Satsuki die, then what's the point? Open the fucking door!"

He complies without another word. You step inside, and the airlock closes behind you, and the inner door opens. It's like a raging cyclone of light in there, with Satsuki in its center. For some reason, the uniform is gone, and she's completely naked.

The only thing that comes to your mind is getting her out of here. You run up to her, besting the strong force pushing you to the side, and try to grab her. In that moment, the lights stop spinning, briefly turn red, and... disappear.

Satsuki, appearing extremely drained, looks at you with some effort. "...Ryuuko? ...I'm sorry, this was... foolish of me." She slowly slumps against you.

You gasp. "Satsuki?! Wake up, Satsuki!"

Seeing no other option, you press your ear against her chest, around where the heart is. You can hear it, which is a relief, but... it's beating weakly. She needs help. You carefully take her in your arms, and leave the chamber.

Outside you can see only Iori, and two adult men, who appear to be paramedics. They immediately bring the stretcher closer, so that you can place Satsuki on it. While they check

her vitals, you bombard them with questions.

"Is she okay? Will she make it?"

"She seems unharmed, just exhausted.", one of them answers. "She'll be fine."

You exhale in relief, feeling a huge weight lifted from your heart. "...Can I come with her?"

"Sorry, but you would be getting in the way. You did well to save Lady Satsuki, but leave the rest to us. You should be able to visit her in the infirmary pretty soon."

"Okay..."

The paramedics storm off with Satsuki in tow. You are left with Iori, who is still looking at you as if he saw an alien.

"...What?", you ask.

"You... survived? You're... actually alive?", he utters.

"I'm more concerned about Satsuki, but yeah, I'm alive. What of it?"

"Unbelievable... Simply unbelievable..." He slowly walks off towards his computer.

You grit your teeth. "That's all you have to say?! All you care about?! I saved Satsuki, that's what matters!"

Iori turns to face you, sobering up. "Make no mistake, Matoi. I am extremely grateful for what you did. All of us are. The thing is, there is no way you could've survived it. And here you are, completely unfazed by Life Fiber bioenergies several magnitudes over the average lethal threshold."

"And Satsuki surviving the same thing isn't surprising?"

He adjusts his glasses. "Lady Satsuki was in the epicenter. The eye of the storm, so to speak. The energy was being released outwards, not inwards. She got a considerably smaller dose than you, and you saw the state she was in."

You take a step back. "So... is there something wrong with me?"

"I don't know. And right now, we can't find out, as the equipment got destroyed. I will get to fixing it right away."

You take a look around. "...Come to think of it, where the hell did everyone else go?"

"They went to call for paramedics, as asked. However, they haven't returned. Your guess is as good as mine." Iori approaches the scanning chamber, to assess the damage. "But bothering me won't help you find them."

"Bothering you?"

"I need to fix this. It's not just you who needs scanning. I will have to see if this accident didn't have any lasting impact on Lady Satsuki."

"...And what if it did?"

Iori looks away. "We'll see."

You leave the lab, and start wandering aimlessly across the school's empty corridors, hoping to run into somebody. Your thoughts are someplace else, though. Why did you ask Satsuki if she's going to try? Maybe if you didn't, this wouldn't have happened. You know her well enough to realize she never backs down from a challenge, and this definitely was one. She survived, but it was your fault she got in danger.

Your walk ends when you stumble upon the same set of elevators as before. Two of them, one of which took you to and from the lab, have a sign on the wall between them. You approach it to investigate.

"Student Council and Sewing Club use only."

Sewing Club is a no-brainer, but does this mean you can also access a location restricted to the Student Council with those? Maybe that's where everyone else went. You press the button, and step inside. You didn't pay attention to the floor buttons earlier, but now you notice two of them are outlined in red - the bottom- and topmost one.

"Guess I'm going up.", you mutter to yourself.

With the ride taking as long as the one down did, you realize you're headed for the impressive tower looming over the academy grounds. Is that where the Student Council room is?

"Student Council chambers.", the speaker in the elevator announces. That clears things up.

It seems that a fairly long, narrow hallway separates the elevators from the rest of the floor. You proceed through it, and find yourself in an extremely posh room. Red carpet, expensive furniture, subtle, tasteful lighting... and the other four, whom you've been looking for.

"Matoi!"

"Is Satsuki-chan alright?"

"They wouldn't let us back in!"

"Calm down, all of you.", you say. "Yes, she's shaken up, but fine. The paramedics took her to the infirmary, said we can visit her later."

"The four of us left to get them, but what about you?", Inumuta asks. "What happened in

there?"

"Well... I walked in there, and got Satsuki out.", you answer. "And that's about it."

The four fix you with the same looks of bewilderment as Iori did, although not on the same scale. Guess they don't know as much about how lethal it's supposed to be.

Inumuta shakes his head slightly. "...I'm not sure I understand. You... walked in there? Into that... mayhem?"

"That's what happened. Iori looked at me as if he saw an alien, too." You shrug. "I'm just glad Satsuki is safe."

The guys give you a look of amazement, and respect. Meanwhile, Nonon clings to you, while sobbing into your chest.

"Thank you, Ryuuko...", she mumbles.

"No need to thank me. I just did what I had to. I care about her too, after all."

You did what you had to, indeed - as Satsuki's companion and partner, and because you were the reason the whole thing happened.

"Still, this begs the question: how did you manage to survive this?" Inumuta gives you an inquisitive look. "My knowledge of Life Fibers suggests-"

"I know, I know, there's no way I could've survived." You wave your hand dismissively. " Iori told me that, too. He said he wants to scan me to find out, so there's that. Whatever the reason, it helped me save Satsuki. That's what matters."

You take a while to look around more closely. The room is spherical, and houses little other than the sofas Sanageyama and Nonon are sitting on, the counter to the side, in front of which Inumuta is seated, and two throne-like chairs, one a bit more elevated than the other. Gamagoori prefers to stand, it seems.

The room's walls are covered in red curtains, but you notice two openings to the left and right, and one behind the thrones. There must be more rooms in the tower. You can explore later, though. It's been over an hour since Satsuki was taken to the infirmary. Surely, she must've woken up by now.

"You guys got the paramedics, so you know where the infirmary is, right?", you ask.

Inumuta does, at least. He leads you through the maze of corridors, to what looks more like a private clinic than an infirmary. Guess everything about Honnouji Academy is blown out of proportion. You're glad Satsuki is getting proper medical attention, though. A woman dressed like a doctor passing by the lobby notices you.

"Can I help any of you?"

"I'm guessing you only have one patient here at the moment.", you say. "How is she?"

"Ah, you're here to visit Lady Satsuki? She's recovered, you can see her. The room right over there."

A rule you've noticed about adults who know Satsuki is that all of them refer to her as "Lady". A good reminder of just how important her family is, in case you ever forget. You make your way to the room in question. Inside, you indeed find Satsuki. She's in a bed, and attached to various monitoring devices, but is definitely looking better. However, upon noticing her guests, she avoids eye contact, as if ashamed. Seeing as nobody else intends to do so, you decide to break the silence.

"You alright, Satsuki?"

"...Physically, yes.", she answers. "However... I've embarrassed myself in front of you all, and put you in danger, Ryuuko. Perhaps I am not fit to lead."

"What are you talking about? It was all my fault! I threw a challenge to you without even realizing, and this happened!"

She shakes her head. "Your words had nothing to do with it. It was my arrogance. I would've done it even if you hadn't said anything. I felt the need to prove myself, acted rashly, and... here we are. There is no blame on you. Only my gratitude, for saving me from my foolishness."

"Satsuki-"

"You two done wresting the blame from each other?", Nonon asks. "You're both stupid, and should stop making others worry."

"That is no way to speak to Lady Satsuki, Jakuzure!", Gamagoori immediately booms.

"But I'm fair game?", you mutter.

Satsuki raises her hand. "Calm down, Gamagoori. She is right, on my account at least. I let my worst qualities cloud my judgement today. That is a mistake I will not make again. Thank you, all of you, for helping me when I needed it."

Before anybody else can say anything, a different doctor storms inside the room.

"You can't just walk in here! Lady Satsuki needs rest!", he says, gesticulating frantically.

"But, we did ask another doctor.", you say. "She said it was fine."

"Then she was wrong! Lady Satsuki still has to stay here at least for the night, we need to ensure everything is in order. I'll be back in a couple minutes, and I don't want to see any of you here!" He rushes off.

"Satsuki, tell him something."

"Doctor's orders. Can't argue with that." It's good to see her smile back.

"I suppose we should get going, then.", Inumuta concludes. "We wish you a quick and full recovery, Lady Satsuki. And a timely discharge."

"You don't get to speak for everyone, nerd.", Nonon grumbles. Her tone and expression immediately shift as she looks at her childhood friend. "Get well soon, Satsuki."

"You said the same thing as I did, just worded it differently."

"Shut up."

"Don't worry, I expect us to be back to work tomorrow.", Satsuki says. "For now, you should all settle in your new quarters. They're located in the Student Council chambers, and your belongings were already transported there. And again, thank you."

The others give her a quick bow, and turn to leave. You pretend to follow them for a while, until they disappear behind a corner. You immediately run up to Satsuki's bed, and brush your lips against hers. She gently stops you from going further, by placing a finger on your mouth.

"I'm sorry, Ryuuko. I'm still pretty exhausted. That, and there's a worked up doctor about to come back here. Don't take this the wrong way - I'll be more than happy to continue once I get out of here." She leans in near your ear. "I owe you my life."

You blush. "Y-you make this sound a lot more heroic than it was. And yeah, I understand. I'll see you soon, Satsuki."

"You will." She tugs on your collar as you rise up, bringing you back to her level. "By the way, you should really start settling in your quarters. I think you'll like the surprises waiting for you there."

You blink. "...Okay."

You finally leave the infirmary, passing the angry doctor on your way out, and head straight to the elevators. Satsuki's words got you curious. What could those "surprises" be, you wonder?

The tower's central room is largely empty. Everyone aside from Sanageyama seems to have taken Satsuki's advice to heart. On a closer glance, he's looking pretty down.

"What's up?", you ask.

"I asked one of the doctors if I could give Lady Satsuki some konjac gel. They said no."

You tilt your head. "Konjac gel?"

He stands up, his eyes blazing with passion. "It's a cure-all! It would surely help her return to full strength!"

"...You know what year this is, right?"

"Hmph." He crosses his arms. "If it wasn't true, my family wouldn't be able to make a living off it."

"You sure they're not just selling sweets?"

"And what if they do?"

"...Then your point is kinda... non-existent.", you answer. "Listen, I know you want to help, but we've already done everything we could. Satsuki is fine, now we just gotta wait."

You don't know a lot about Sanageyama, but it seems that Satsuki's charisma dragged him along quite effectively. Hopefully, he doesn't have feelings for her. That would be awkward to deal with.

"So, uh... any idea where my quarters are?", you ask.

He shrugs. "I haven't even looked for mine yet."

You shrug back, and start your search. Behind the curtain to the left you find doors belonging to Sanageyama and Gamagoori.

"Well, you don't have to worry about looking anymore.", you call out. "It's right over here."

Yours isn't, however. Not on the other side of the room, either. That only leaves... the front curtain. But, wouldn't that one belong to Satsuki? You walk past it, and find yourself in front of two double doors, set a bit apart.

The first reads "Student Council President Kiryuuin Satsuki". The other...

"Student Council Vice-President Matoi Ryuuko"

"Vice-president.", you utter silently. You're officially Satsuki's right hand. That throne next to hers belongs to you. That must be the first surprise. You step inside, eager to find out what's next on the list.

Behind the door is a fairly long hallway, with windows on one side, providing a nice sight. On the very end of it is another door, this time smaller. You step through it, and find yourself in a spacious, luxurious living room. It's a massive upgrade over your temporary middle school housing, and that's saying something. Satsuki spared no expense, it seems. Though you know there are many hardships ahead in those upcoming three years, the thought that you'll be staying here in that time is comforting.

Still, this room appears oddly large. If it's so big, how do Satsuki's quarters fit in the tower? You take a look around, trying to figure it out, and notice another door next to the one you've entered with. You walk up to the other door, open it, and see... a hallway. Exactly the same as the one you walked through. You open the other door, just to make sure, and find an identical hallway, with the windows flipped around.

Both hallways connect to the same room. That means... you share your quarters with Satsuki.

In any other circumstances, you would be running in circles, and jumping out of joy, but you're not really up for it at the moment. Regardless, it makes you feel a whole lot better, and all the more impatient for Satsuki to return. You take your time exploring your new home. A spacious bathroom with marble walls, a fully equipped kitchen, a... personal gym? Aside from the usual sword practice equipment, you spot some other devices, such as a treadmill. You're not even sure how some of those work.

There is one door you haven't yet opened. That must be the corridor between the bedrooms. Might as well see what you (and Satsuki) will be sneaking through at night. Your hand pushing the handle immediately slumps to your side as the door opens.

"No way."

There is no corridor. There is only one bedroom, and only one, king sized bed. Red and blue dominate in the room's color scheme, meshing together tastefully. Out of all the surprises, this is the best one. You jump on the bed, and roll back and forth. You will spend every night together, with no fear of somebody finding out.

...But not this night. This night, you will be alone. The bed feels too big already.

Unfortunately, you can't even occupy yourself with unpacking the baggage, as it appears Soroi already did it for both of you. Though you'd prefer to do it yourself, you'll have to thank him, regardless. The whole situation must be as tough to him as it is to you. He loves Satsuki like his own daughter.

Time seems to be passing awfully slowly. Though it feels like a week's worth of things have happened, the day is still nowhere close to ending. Extremely bored, and eager to see Satsuki back on her feet, you think today's events over once again.

There is something unusual about you, apparently. You can shrug off absurd levels of Life Fiber exposure like it's nothing. Is that good, or bad? You don't feel sick or different in any way. Maybe you were just born with a high resistance like that. Iori did say it varies from person to person.

Whatever it is, you can't bring yourself to see it in a negative light. It made saving Satsuki possible. Who knows what would've happened to her if she stayed in that chamber any longer. When you took her in your arms, she looked extremely exhausted. Exhausted, and… naked. Come to think of it, this was the first time you've ever seen her in less than her nightwear. Even given the situation, her body looked every bit as marvelous as you imagined it.

...No, that's not a good thing to concentrate on, as alluring as it is. You didn't go in there to see her naked, but to save her. Hopefully, the next time you see her unclothed will be under... different circumstances.

Though alone, you've managed to have a pretty good night's sleep. This bed really is something else. As comfortable as you are, you're eager to get up, and visit Satsuki in the infirmary. Hopefully she really will get discharged today.

Or perhaps, she's already out.

"Good morning, Ryuuko." Satsuki is sitting on the couch with her legs crossed, looking fully rested.

"Satsuki!" You immediately run up to her, and fall into her waiting arms. With no stalling involved, you continue the kiss you were supposed to have yesterday, as promised.

"Feels like we haven't done this in ages.", you say.

"That's because we haven't." Satsuki cups your chin, and brings you closer for more.

It doesn't take long for the two of you to end up lying on the sofa together. Who knew kissing could be this exhausting?

"So wait... if you were here, why didn't you come to bed?"

She smirks. "You looked like you were enjoying yourself, drooling on the pillow you were embracing while mumbling my name. I didn't want to interrupt you."

"...Jerk.", you mutter. "I really missed you."

Satsuki leans in towards one of your ears, pecking your cheek along the way. "Don't worry. Neither of us will spend this night alone."

You wrap your arms around her tightly. "Don't risk your life like that ever again, Satsuki. The world can't lose you. I can't lose you."

She locks her eyes with yours. Something looks a bit different about them. Must be the

lighting.

"I can't promise you I won't take risks, Ryuuko. That's something we all will have to do to make it through this. However, the events of yesterday were a result of my arrogance, not necessity. I promise you I won't risk my life without a clear need ever again."

You bury your face in her hair, silent. You'd prefer her to say she won't risk her life period, but you know that's not an answer you can hear. Not as long as Ragyou is out there.

"Ryuuko."

"Hm?"

"You're still in your nightwear."

"Well, yeah. I only just woke up. Is that bad?"

"We have things to do today. You should get changed."

You groan, and press yourself closer against her. "Come on, you just got back from nearly dying. Can't we at least spend some more time together?"

She smiles. "I'd love to, and we will. Unfortunately, Honnouji Academy needs its Student Council President and Vice-President to stop making out for the moment, and get to work."

"Right, right. Can't make all the important decisions and say all the big words while our mouths are glued together."

Albeit with great psychological effort, you manage to untangle yourself from Satsuki's clasp, and start preparing for the day by taking a shower as quick as humanely possible, while also getting clean.

"It feels a bit weird, still wearing our old uniforms here."

"Our new uniforms should be ready before spring break ends.", Satsuki says. "Iori needs some time to finalize the designs. Speaking of which, we will need to visit him, preferably now."

"...For those scans?"

Seeing your worried expression, Satsuki takes your hand in hers, and squeezes it reassuringly.

"There's nothing to worry about."

You smile weakly. "...Yeah." You can't help but think there is.

"I'll wait for you in the Student Council chambers. It would be a bit suspicious if we stepped out of our doors simultaneously, don't you think?"

"Fair enough."

Satsuki leaves, and you continue getting ready without hurry. It seems the two of you will need to do this regularly. Ultimately, it's a small price to pay for having her all to yourself in spare time. Once enough time has passed, you step out of your quarters, as well.

"Well, it looks like that whole show was for nothing.", you say, looking around the central room. Other than you and Satsuki, there's nobody here.

"Not entirely.", she answers. "Inumuta was here until a moment ago. Then again... he saw right through it."

"W-what?! He knows?"

Satsuki looks away from you. "...He's known for a while, actually. While he was setting up the computer network here, he had to visit our chambers to set some things up, as well."

Your palm rapidly meets your face. "Satsuki..."

"I'm sorry, it... didn't occur to me at the time. Thankfully, Inumuta is not one to share information of this kind.", she says. You're not sure who's she trying to cheer up – you, or herself.

You shrug. "Well, I guess he would've figured it out anyway. Let's hope he really knows how to keep his mouth shut. Anyway... where's everyone else?"

"Busy talking to early arrivals in their respective departments, from what I gather.", Satsuki answers. "The students we've recruited throughout the last year are starting to pour in."

"...Now that you mention it, what duties does everyone have?"

So far, you only know that Satsuki is the Student Council President, and you're her second in command. You still don't know what that entails, though.

"I'll explain it in detail a bit later today. To describe your responsibilities in short, you will be supervising the work of the other four."

"Sweet."

Satsuki smiles. "That means you'll have a lot of work, yourself."

"...Not so sweet."

The two of you head down to the Sewing Club laboratory. Iori is there, looking a lot less lively than yesterday. The bags under his eyes make him appear even grumpier than before.

He nods towards you. "Lady Satsuki, Matoi."

"Are we perhaps too early?", Satsuki asks.

"No, not at all." Iori shakes his head vigorously. "I've finished fixing the hardware a moment ago, actually. Let's-" He stifles a yawn. "...get to the scanning right away."

You tilt your head. "You alright? You look like you stayed up all night."

"I did." he answers. "All of the machinery in the scanning chamber needed fixing or replacing, and it had to be ready for today."

"Perhaps we can perform the scans later.", Satsuki suggests. "There are still other matters the two of us must attend to."

Iori shakes his head again. "I appreciate the thought, but it's not necessary. We can do it right now. We should, in fact. Every moment you spend unscanned could mean danger for you, Lady Satsuki."

"Very well. Your dedication is admirable, Iori."

As Satsuki approaches the scanning chamber, dread fills your heart. What if something happens again?

"Satsuki, wait..."

She looks over her shoulder. "Ryuuko?"

"...Is it really a good idea for you to go in there again?"

"I'll be fine.", she answers, giving you a slight reassuring smile.

"That's right. There is no reason to worry this time around, Matoi.", Iori pipes up. "Lady Satsuki is not going to try on any Life Fiber clothing. All I will do now is scan her for any presence of Life Fibers in her body. It's completely non-invasive."

"...Alright."

You know they're both right, but the feeling of worry lingers. You cross your arms, and nervously bite your lip as Satsuki enters the chamber.

"Right, then. Let's begin." Iori presses some buttons that look important, and the chamber's walls spring to life.

"What the-"

It turns out the walls were actually a set of retractable panels, concealing various machinery. Several devices emerge from the sides, and approach Satsuki, who looks on with interest. The machines slowly move around her, scanning her from every direction and angle possible, all

the while Iori stares at the computer screen intently.

"It appears everything is in order.", he concludes after a while. "No Life Fiber presence in any form was detected. That's a relief."

The machinery comes to a halt, and hides in the walls again. As Satsuki steps out unscathed, you let out a tiny sigh of relief.

"Then, it can be assumed this accident had no lasting effects?", Satsuki asks.

Iori nods. "Everything points to that conclusion, yes. The degree of precision those devices possess leaves little to no room for doubt."

"Very good. Thank you, Iori."

"Not a problem at all, Lady Satsuki." His weary expression suggests otherwise. "I suppose it's your turn now, Matoi. I hope we'll be able to find out what is it that kept you alive through this."

You glance at Satsuki, who nods. You nod back, and step through the airlock. Merely stepping foot in this place again makes you uncomfortable. The memories are still fresh in your mind.

You stand in the center of the small room, and wait. As with Satsuki, the walls make way for scanning devices, which repeat the procedure from earlier.

"Hm." It seems Iori expected something different.

"Something wrong?", you ask.

He pushes his glasses up. "Strictly speaking, no. There aren't any traces of Life Fibers in your body. However, there is some residual Life Fiber bioenergy present, which makes sense, considering what you did yesterday. It made me realize that Lady Satsuki's body should show some traces of such energy as well, which it does not."

You scratch your head. "And in Japanese?"

"...You'll be fine.", he says, rolling his eyes. "I suppose you took that energy on yourself when you interrupted the reaction, hence why Lady Satsuki doesn't have any in her. However, your inhuman resistance to Life Fibers remains a mystery."

You shrug. "I'm fine with that."

Iori suddenly slams his fist against the control panel. "But I'm not! There must be an explanation of some kind!"

You flinch, taken aback by his outburst. "Whoa, calm down."

"Iori.", Satsuki chimes in. "While Ryuuko's unusual trait is certainly intriguing, as long as it doesn't pose a danger to her or anyone else, it can wait."

He sighs. "...Forgive me, Lady Satsuki, I got carried away. I just... can't stand leaving a question like that unanswered."

"I'm sure we'll find an answer in due time."

"...Yes, of course. I expect the new Sewing Club members to start arriving soon, and there are still Ultima Uniforms to take care of. I'll get right to it." He heads deeper into the lab.

"Iori.", Satsuki calls out after him. "Perhaps you should get some rest first? We still have some time to spare, and I can't have you working in this state."

"But-"

"That is an order.", she interrupts him calmly. "Get some sleep."

Iori slumps his shoulders, resigned. "Yes, ma'am. And... thank you."

"Don't you think he's a little nuts about this whole Life Fiber thing?", you ask Satsuki on the way back up. While you're interested in the reason behind your high resistance to Life Fibers, Iori's fixation on it is off-putting.

"Iori has always been inquisitive, ever since I've known him, and Life Fiber research is his field of expertise. It's only natural that he would be interested in something as unique as your ability."

"....I guess. How long have you known him, anyway?"

She smiles slightly. "Quite a while. Soroi, who is his uncle, introduced us when we were five years old."

"Huh. From the way he talks to you, I wouldn't take you two for childhood friends."

"It's just the way he is, how he's always been. Additionally, we haven't seen each other in a while. After kindergarten, our meetings have been sporadic."

"That explains why I've never met him before." The elevator arrives at the top floor, and the door opens. "Well, what now?"

"Now, as mentioned earlier, we get to work.", Satsuki answers.

You follow her to the Student Council chambers, where she takes a seat on her chair. With her legs crossed, and her hands placed on the armrests, she really looks in charge.

"Lookin' good, Prez."

She stretches a hand towards the chair to her right. "I'll look even better with you by my side, Vice-President."

You snort. "Am I your right hand or a décor element?" You walk over to your chair, and sit down. The elevated position makes you feel a bit odd, but it sure is comfortable.

Satsuki reaches over to cup your chin. "I believe you'll do well as both."

In response, you take her hand in yours, and plant a kiss on it. "I'll do my best."

You hear a voice from the far end of the room. "I had my doubts, but I suppose they were unfounded."

The two of you freeze up as Inumuta steps inside. A moment later, you rapidly break apart, clearing your throats nervously. He smirks, and walks past you to what seems to be his favorite spot in the room, the bar-like counter on the side.

"I didn't mean to interrupt.", he continues. "I'll be minding my own business, so don't worry about me."

"S-shut up.", you choke out, your face reddening rapidly.

Inumuta pushes his glasses up to his nose. "Oh? No retort or threat from miss Vice-President? Well, they do call it "the purest form of love"... Perhaps it has managed to affect even you."

You dream of nothing but punching him square in his stupid face right now, but... Satsuki probably wouldn't like that.

"Inumuta...", she finally speaks up. "We would greatly appreciate your... discretion in this matter." It's barely visible, but she's blushing, as well.

"That goes without saying, Lady Satsuki.", he answers. "However... my discretion might not be very helpful when faced with such, forgive me, imprudence."

"Hey, watch it, four-eyes!", you cut in, rising from your chair.

Satsuki raises her hand. "Ryuuko, he's right. No amount of secrecy on his end will help if we're not careful, as well. What we were doing just now was anything but careful."

You plop back down on your seat. "...I suppose. But..." You fix your gaze on Inumuta. "I'll be watching you."

He smirks again, and turns his attention to the laptop in front of him. You're glad he didn't

respond, actually. This situation is embarrassing as hell, and you want to forget about it already.

"That aside... we need to summon the rest of the Student Council here.", Satsuki says. "An introduction to Honnouji Academy is in order."

"After all that's happened yesterday, I'm glad we can assemble here properly today.", you say.

"Are we not waiting for Iori, then?", Inumuta asks.

"He's busy right now. I wouldn't want to interrupt his work, as it is vital to our plan."

Hearing your words, Ryuuko holds back laughter, masking it as a cough. You give her a small look of disapproval, and continue.

"While the information was not delivered in a fashion I would've preferred it to be, all of you are already more or less aware of what your duties are. However, it is important that you know what everyone else is responsible for. Efficient cooperation between every aspect of the Student Council will be key to success."

"Gamagoori Ira is the Disciplinary Bureau Chairman.", you declare, looking at him. "While Honnouji Academy is not an ordinary high school, it still has a set of rules to aid smooth operation. Your department's role is to make sure they are upheld."

He stands at attention. "And that is a task me and my men will not fail, Lady Satsuki."

"That is what I hope to see. Next, we have Sanageyama Uzu, Athletic Committee Chair. Your responsibility is governing over sports-oriented clubs, as well as their facilities and equipment. It is an important role, as sports clubs are our primary armed force."

"I understand.", Sanageyama answers. "There's a problem, though... no clubs exist yet."

You smirk. "Of course. This will be your responsibility in the coming days, Sanageyama – you need to find the right people to create and lead clubs."

"Understood, Lady Satsuki."

"Similarly..." You turn to your oldest friend. "Jakuzure Nonon, Non-Athletic Committee Chair. As you lead the culture clubs, you will also need to take part in their formation. While sports clubs serve a strictly military purpose, yours are meant to play a wider array of roles. Keep that in mind."

Nonon nods in understanding, and glances at Sanageyama with an expression of superiority.

He crosses his arms, and glares back. You can already see this cooperation going places.

You carry on with the introduction. "Inumuta Houka, Intelligence and Tactics Officer. In addition to your data management responsibilities, you also control the science clubs. Thus, the responsibility of watching over their formation lies with you."

He bows. "Naturally."

"There is one club none of you have authority over, and I'm sure you all know which.", you say. "The Sewing Club, led by Iori Shirou. As his club's work is instrumental to Honnouji Academy's operation, he is also a Student Council member, of which fact you're aware. That said, I expect you and your science clubs to cooperate closely with the Sewing Club, Inumuta."

"As per your instructions, I've already started on that, Lady Satsuki."

"Very good. Finally..." You look to your right. "We have Matoi Ryuuko, Vice-President."

She immediately sits up straight, and puffs her chest out in pride.

"Your job is to ensure the aforementioned departments function without issue. If any of them encounters a problem they can't deal with in their own capacity, you are to look into it. Additionally..." You give her the tiniest of smiles. "As you are my right hand, I might assign other tasks to you as I see fit."

Ryuuko slowly nods with a smirk of her own. "As you wish, Lady Satsuki."

She's never called you that before, and you're not sure if you should let her do it, considering how seductive she makes it sound.

Regardless... "With your roles explained, I believe I should elaborate on how they relate to the bigger picture. The academy's hierarchy system will be an important tool in training an army for what's to come. As you might have figured out, Ultima Uniforms are closely tied to said hierarchy. You could go as far as say they define it."

Your statement rouses interest. "Define it?", Gamagoori asks.

"That's right. It was part of the reason for yesterday's Life Fiber resistance test you all took. In Honnouji Academy, a student's uniform indicates their rank. After some deliberation, Iori and I decided on stars as the visual representation of said rank. The more stars a uniform has, the more power it grants to the wearer, literally, and figuratively."

"So, the literal power is how much Life Fibers the uniform has, but what about figurative power?", Nonon speaks up. Others seem to be just as curious.

"Social status.", you explain. "We have one Four-Star, and four Three-Stars. You are the Student Council, and you live in the tower here. That's the very top of the hierarchy. Next, there's Two-Stars – top performance club presidents. They live in the residential area directly

below Honnouji Academy. Iori is one such Two-Star, albeit with some special privileges, considering the importance of his work. Then, One-Stars – less distinguished club presidents, hard-working club members, disciplinary officers, top students. The apartment blocks below the Two-Star district belong to them."

You continue. "At the very end of the hierarchy are No-Stars. Aside from new arrivals, they are the rock bottom for a good reason. Slackers, underachievers, rule breakers, weaklings." Your tone conveys perhaps a bit too much disdain. "They belong in the slums, and they-"

"Slums.", Ryuuko cuts in. "Yeah, I was wondering what that pile of rubble at the bottom was."

She's not making a joke. You've never heard such a cold tone from her before. You give her a confused look, as does everyone else.

"I didn't think somebody as smart as you can come up with something this awful, Satsuki.", she says.

What's gotten into her? You stop Gamagoori and Sanageyama from rising from their seats with a quick gesture.

"What do you mean?"

"What do I mean?!" Ryuuko stands up from her own chair. "That you want to use people like tools, just like your mother!"

...Like Ragyou? No. "Ryuuko, this is different. I am doing it out of necessity-"

""Necessity", my ass! Showering the useful, obedient ones with rewards, and dumping the rest into the trash – that's what you want to do! How is it any different from Ragyou's methods?"

No, that can't be right, you're different, you're-

"KNOW YOUR PLACE, MATOI!", Gamagoori booms. "You are in no position to question Lady Satsuki's decisions or methods! Such disobedience.... deserves only punishment!"

Ryuuko's hand immediately rests on Kaizan's hilt. "Try me, big man." The atmosphere turns even icier.

You need to stop this, you need time to think. In a flash, you move from your seat, and grab Ryuuko's hand.

"Ryuuko. Enough."

She loosens her hold on the sword. "Yeah. *Enough*." Without looking at you, she wrests her hand from your grip, and heads straight towards the exit.

You want to stop her, but you can't find the right words. Thus, you watch in silence as she heads towards the elevators, and disappears from your sight. Nobody else moves, or makes a sound. With a sigh, you return to your chair.

"The meeting is adjourned."

Mustering all of your strength, you thrust your sword into the dummy's torso. After so many hits, it seems it's had enough. As the hit makes contact, cracks spread across the wood, and your target falls apart into several large pieces.

"Damn."

That's the third one. Seems those training dummies aren't very sturdy. Then again, they're to be used with shinai, not real swords, sheathed or not. Even Kaizan's scabbard is made of hardened Life Fibers, as Satsuki told you.

...Satsuki.

You sigh, grab another dummy, and resume your practice, this time striking more carefully.

You owe so much to her. She gave you a purpose, a new home, friends... love. She's an exceptional, one-of-a-kind person, and the mere thought that she loves you too is enough to make your stomach feel all funny.

At the same time, you can't understand or accept this plan of hers. Surely, she must've recognized how similar it is to Ragyou's tactics. She's the one who actually knows her, after all. In that case, why did she decide to do it anyway? Does she really believe that it's different because it's a necessity? That the end justifies the means? Is it really a necessity, even?

Despite your best efforts, this dummy is already getting somewhat shaky. You're angry, but this is just a waste of gear. Maybe you should use a shinai instead. That way, you can beat on the target all you want. Thinking that, you head inside the storage room, and find a rack lined with bamboo swords. Perhaps you should take a spare, just in case.

As soon as you enter the training hall again, you freeze in place. Satsuki is here, examining the broken dummies. Hearing your footsteps, she turns to look at you, and tenses up. Neither of you speaks up. What should you even say?

Unable to think of anything, you simply toss the spare shinai in her direction. She catches it, and assumes a combat stance.

Maybe that's what both of you need right now.

"You're such a worrywart, Aikurou. The risk is always there."

"I know.", you say, briefly tightening the embrace before pulling away. "But since you're so carefree, somebody has to worry."

Kinue raises a brow. "Even if it means leaving Doctor Matoi's daughter on her own?"

"I asked him to be here today. Besides, Ryuuko's safety is the least of our concerns surrounding her. Her and little miss Satsuki are the best of friends. I'm not sure why Doctor Matoi is not worried by this."

"There you go again with the worrying.", Kinue says, rolling her eyes. "If he's not bothered by it, you shouldn't be, either. Ryuuko seems like a sweet girl. Maybe she's making a positive impact on Ragyou's kid?"

"...I hope it's not Satsuki who's making an impact on her."

"You're hopeless." She places a palm on your chest, giving you a sultry look. "Don't you have some matters of your own to think about?"

"...What do you mean?"

Kinue sighs, and gives you a light shove. She points to the diamond ring on her finger. The one you proposed to her with.

"Have you picked a date yet?"

That's right. You and Kinagase Kinue are getting married. It's pretty hard to believe, but the woman of your dreams exists, and is engaged to you. Well, maybe it's not so surprising. You are quite charming, if you do say so yourself.

You smile. "I have, actually. What do you think about-"

A sudden shout from the other end of the corridor cuts you off. "There you are!" Kinue's little brother, Tsumugu makes his way towards you.

"Kinue, everything is ready.", he says. "Doctor Matoi asked me to call you over." He glares at you. "And what are YOU doing here? Aren't you supposed to be watching over the girl?"

"Well, I am watching over a girl, am I not?", you ask, placing a hand on Kinue's waist. "My fiancée's security is top priority."

"Let me give you two useful pieces of information. One: I can keep my sister safe without your help." He makes sure to stress the blood relation. "Two-"

Kinue chuckles. "Mugu-kun, I thought the two of you agreed not to fight?" She pinches his cheek, much to his embarrassment.

"...I didn't agree to tolerate him.", he grumbles. "Hurry up. We'll be waiting." He gives you one more sideways glance, and leaves.

"You two need to sit down and have a talk sometime.", Kinue remarks. "Seriously."

"Last time didn't go so well." The black eye wouldn't go away for a week.

"Well, try again. I can't have my husband and brother bicker for years to come."

You let out a resigned sigh. What could you possibly do to win him over? "I'll give it some thought. For now..."

"Yeah, it seems they're waiting for me." Kinue turns in the direction Tsumugu came from. "Maybe this will be the big breakthrough Doctor Matoi needs."

You were actually going to tell her about the wedding date you had in mind, but that can wait. Kinue is in her element.

"You're making that dreamy face again.", you remark.

She giggles. "You'd be making it too if your dream was this close to coming true. Thanks to this research humanity and Life Fibers may really be able to get along."

You're not sure what to think of this idea of hers, but Doctor Matoi seems supportive of it. Perhaps there really is some truth to it, as long as Ragyou has nothing to do with it.

You deftly place your hands on her waist, and turn her to face you. "Are you saying marrying me wasn't your dream?" Leaning forward, you slowly close in for a kiss.

Kinue surprises you with a quick peck on the lips. "Who said I can only have one dream? Besides, that's two dreams close to coming true. I'm a lucky girl."

"That you are."

"Anyway, let's save the flirting for later. The old man hates to be kept waiting!"

It's been six years since your only other real fight, and it shows. Satsuki is way stronger, faster, more fierce. Then again, so are you. Despite the circumstances, you must admit you're having a great time. Having trained together for so long, you know her tactics like the back of

your hand, and vice versa.

While fierce, the duel is silent. Neither of you utters a word. Not like you need to. With the clashing of your blades, you convey your feelings to each other. You're both conflicted, and neither of you really wants to argue. Unfortunately, your ideas about how things should be differ.

Satsuki's powerful, relentless fighting style is giving you a run for your money. She's trying to wear you down, and slowly but surely, she's succeeding. On the other hand, you're doing your best to hold out as long as possible, hoping she'll run out of steam first. The trained grace and beauty she moves with... no, that shouldn't be your focus right now.

A staggering strike snaps you out of your daze. You somehow manage to block and recover. Hoping she'll get tired won't get you anywhere, this is Satsuki you're talking about. You need to take initiative.

While parrying the subsequent attacks, you carefully analyze her moves, and fish out a weak point. Eager to take advantage of it, you thrust your shinai forward. In the last moment, Satsuki reacts, and pushes your sword aside with a well-aimed blow, causing you to lose your balance again. As you struggle not to fall flat on your face, she takes a swing at you, exploiting your vulnerability in turn. In the nick of time, you manage to regain your footing, and leap back.

That was a close call. Something tells you the next time this happens, you won't be as lucky. You're getting tired. It's time to finish this fight. You steady your stance, and look at Satsuki again. She is just as drained as you. Looks like the next clash will decide the outcome. You circle her carefully, trying to determine her intent.

All of a sudden, she rushes towards you, already preparing for a strike. With no other options left, you respond in kind. You concentrate all of your remaining strength into this single blow. As your blades collide, you meet Satsuki's fierce gaze with yours. In that moment, something cracks.

Both swords break in half, and the severed pieces of bamboo fall to the floor. The two of you are left frozen in your combat stances, clutching the shattered weapons, and taking heavy breaths.

"Well, this is awkward."

Satsuki almost smiles at your comment. "Indeed."

You drop the swords, and stand up straight.

"I don't want to fight or argue anymore, Satsuki.", you say.

"Neither do I.", she answers. "However, that doesn't make our conflict disappear. Our opinions still differ."

"Yeah. What should we do, then?"

"Let's talk.", she offers. "Explain our points of view to each other. A solution just might come around as a result."

That sounds better than shouting at each other. You nod. "Let's do that."

You head towards the exit, beckoning to Satsuki to follow you. Outside, you take a look around the academy. It's a beautiful place. Does it have to be home to such ugly rules? You start walking downward, to the slums, at a leisurely pace.

"So, tell me. Why do you think this kind of system is necessary?", you ask.

"As I've mentioned, Honnouji Academy exists to train an army. I've created the star system to sustain this goal.", Satsuki says. "The primary factor here is motivation."

"Motivation?"

"The rewards Ultima Uniforms bring with them are meant to encourage students to give their best. If they are dissatisfied with their current living conditions, they have the option to improve them while bettering themselves, and bolstering our ranks."

You scratch your head. This makes sense. "I can see where you're coming from. It's calculated, but it seems like our best option."

"I'm glad you understand. I'm sure you have more questions, however."

"Sure do. If this whole system revolves around working hard to get rewarded, what about Two-Stars?" You point to the lavish villas you're passing by. "Can they work hard enough to join the Student Council?"

"I'm... not sure. Most likely, no.", Satsuki answers. "It might seem like nepotism, but it's best if the Student Council remains a tight-knit group, driven by ideals, not rewards. Of course, if we happen upon an outstanding, trustworthy individual, we shall evaluate them. To answer your question about the Two-Stars' motivation, it's quite simple – they'll have to continue working hard to maintain their position."

"Oh. Yeah, that makes sense."

A system preying on human greed and expediency, while at the same time rewarding effort, and punishing underperformance. You were wrong about it, that's for sure. It really is a plan befitting Satsuki's vast intellect. It's rough around the edges, however, the edges being the slums.

For a while, you walk in silence, looking around. The One-Star apartment blocks are not particularly flashy, but they look like a respectable place to live. There is a noticeable difference of standard between them and the mansions further up. That's nothing compared to the jarring contrast the apartments and the slums provide, however. The two of you stop right

at the border between the two areas. The spot provides a good view on the measly buildings below.

"Well, here we are.", you say. "Our problem."

"What do you believe is the root of the issue?", Satsuki asks.

"There's no root." You spread your arms forward. "All of this is an issue. I think you can see just how huge the difference between One- and No-Star districts is."

"The difference between ranks has to be significant. Especially when it comes to No-Stars. They're supposed to be discontent with their situation, so that they strive to improve it."

"I get that, but don't you think this is too much? They should at least have livable conditions."

"I kept close tabs on the construction of the academy and the surrounding city.", she says. "I made sure the standard of those buildings is adequate for survival."

"Adequate for survival? Let's verify that." You look around, and pick a random building to approach.

Satsuki raises her brows. "Verify, how?"

"By taking a look inside." Expectedly, the door is locked. However, a solid push quickly solves that problem. You didn't even have to put much strength into it. You glance back at Satsuki. "That's a great start."

Despite having been constructed very recently, the building looks like it's at least two decades old. It's hard to call it a house. More accurately, it's a shack, hastily thrown together from spare materials. Two tiny rooms, and an even smaller bathroom. It houses only a cracked toiet, and a rusty, bent faucet without a sink.

"This is..." Satsuki is seemingly at a loss for words.

"You know what else you called "adequate"?", you ask. "The apartment we left just yesterday. Do you think those two are comparable?"

"No, they are not.", she answers, still looking around with an expression of disbelief.

"See, those shacks might be enough to survive in, but it's not going to be easy. It's the bare minimum." You place a hand on her shoulder. "I understand what you were going for here. Encouraging hard work through promise of a better life is a good idea, but this is taking it too far."

"I..." Satsuki sighs. She looks confused, lost. You slowly turn her to face you, and hug her. She accepts the embrace immediately, returning the gesture, and relaxing in your arms. It's great to feel her closeness again. The invisible wall this argument divided you with was painful to bear.

"Sometimes, even the best need a helping hand.", you speak quietly into her ear. "You extended one to me all those years ago. Who knows, maybe the ranks of No-Stars will be full of unpolished gems? Don't kick them in the dirt, give them a chance."

"I'm glad I have somebody not afraid to speak their mind.", she utters. "I'm glad I have you, Ryuuko."

By the time you're done discussing the fine details of improving the No-Stars' living conditions, and explaining everything to the others, it's already almost evening. If every day spent in Honnouji Academy will feel as long as those first two, it might get exhausting quick. So many things have happened, and yet so little time has passed. Once everyone else goes about their own business, you and Satsuki retreat into your quarters.

You plop down on the nearest chair in the kitchen with a heavy sigh. "I'm spent. Can we just call it a day?"

"Nothing else needs to be done today.", Satsuki answers. "I think we deserve an early night, all things considered." She looks around. "Soroi?"

"Yes, milady?" His sudden appearance makes you jump in your seat.

"Notify anyone who might want to see either of us that we have retired for the evening." Satsuki suddenly realizes her mistake. "Just... not in a single sentence."

Soroi smiles. "Of course, Lady Satsuki. I wish you and Lady Ryuuko a pleasant night." He takes a bow, and turns to leave.

"...Thanks.", you mumble, blushing. You're not sure if he implied what you think he implied.

Satsuki sure thought so. The moment Soroi closes the door, she sits astride in your lap. Before you can express surprise, she silences you with an aggressive, passionate kiss. Rather than her mouth, however, your mind is focused on her butt resting in your lap. The clothes she wears do a poor job of accentuating its volume. You rest your hands on it, partially to prevent her from falling down. This is how true beauty in tactile form must feel like.

Suddenly, the chair rocks backward, and your heart skips a beat. You open your eyes, to meet Satsuki's fear-stricken gaze. Just as you're about to fall over, the chair stops. Satsuki barely managed to plant her legs on the floor, and hold onto the table for support.

"That was close.", she utters under her breath.

"Nice save, Satsuki."

As you both slowly stand up, you realize you're still gripping her bum. You immediately let go, and fix her crumpled skirt. Thankfully, she seems to pay no mind.

"Let's not do that again.", Satsuki concludes. "Those chairs are only meant for one person."

Eager to lie down, you take a quick shower, and head straight for bed. Unwilling to fall asleep alone again, you patiently wait for Satsuki. This will be your first night together here in Honnouji Academy. It feels special. You have an apartment all to yourselves now, and share a single bed. It's like you already got married. Maybe your dreams from some time ago aren't all that unrealistic.

Just when you start getting sleepy, Satsuki enters the room, wearing only a bathrobe. The fluffy, white material compliments her complexion well, and the partially visible, yet tastefully concealed cleavage teases you to no end. She approaches the large wardrobe, facing away from you, and... drops the bathrobe to the floor.

The surprise of it is completely negated by an overwhelming feeling of wonder. One phrase keeps repeating in your mind over and over again as you take in the sight: she's perfect. There isn't a single part of her body that could be improved upon. You could go on and on about how beautiful every aspect of her is, and how this viewing angle makes everything all the more pleasant to the eye.

However, you need to make a certain point here, about her lower back. It was inappropriate to refer to it as "butt", or "bum", even mentally. No, such terms could even be considered insulting in this context. The symmetry, the sublime shape, the splendid size... Only an ass can possess such legendary qualities.

Yes, you can say without a shadow of doubt – Kiryuuin Satsuki has a great ass. It's a shame she just covered it with a nightgown. Still, it's quite the change from what she used to wear to bed before. The breezy-looking, midnight blue nightie does her figure justice, tastefully draping over all the important places. There's something missing, however...

"Satsuki, what about panties?", you ask.

She glances back at you, looking confused. "...What about them?"

"Y-you're not going to wear any?"

"I've never worn any to bed.", she states matter-of-factly.

She doesn't wear panties with nightgowns. That means, all those times you've slept together...

"...Oh." That's one hell of a realization. "Anyway, you look awesome."

She approaches you, smirking seductively. "Do you mean my new nightwear, or what you saw before I put it on?" She finally climbs in the bed, and scoots close to you.

"Both."

"That's what I like to hear, Miss Vice-President." She caresses your neck and chin, before

cupping it. "That reminds me, I still need to punish you for your unruly behavior."

"Then what better time to do it than now?", you ask.

"Indeed."

Without warning, Satsuki pounces you, pressing you down with all of her weight. It's the most pleasant burden you've ever had to bear.

"It's our first night together here, Ryuuko. Let's make it a special one." She slowly meets her lips with yours.

It's a different kiss from the one you shared earlier. Rather than aggressive and greedy, it's slow, sensual. Satsuki savors your taste, and allows you to return the favor. The minty toothpaste both of you use makes for a decent seasoning.

You pull away to take a breath, but Satsuki doesn't stop at that. She moves down from your mouth, and starts planting kisses on your neck. It feels ticklish at first, but it quickly becomes... stimulating. Turns out, you've been really limited in your range of affections. You want to learn more.

Satsuki grants your wish, suddenly slipping her hand under your tank top, and squeezing your breast. You yelp in surprise.

"S-Satsuki? Is this-" You are cut off by another kiss, as she focuses her attention on your mouth again. All the while, she starts playing with one of your nipples, rubbing and poking It with her fingers. You shiver, and let out a stifled moan into Satsuki's mouth. In response, she slips another hand under your shirt to grab your other breast. The combined stimulation elicits even more reactions from you, and slowly turns your shorts damp. Are you this sensitive, or is she just this good?

Satsuki seems to take notice of your excitement, as she slowly moves her hand away from your chest, and downward. She briefly caresses your waist, before sliding her fingers into your tight shorts. She's not even touching you there yet, and you already feel all tingly, wiggling your hips slightly.

Suddenly, it all stops, and Satsuki freezes in place. She slowly withdraws both of her hands, and breaks away from your mouth, staring at you blankly.

"...Satsuki?"

Hot tears start falling onto your face as she begins to tremble, her expression stricken with utter terror.

"No... I... I didn't... No!" She rapidly moves away from you, and curls up on the far side of the bed, sobbing loudly.

"...What's wrong? What happened?", you ask, slowly closing the distance between you.

"Stay away from me, Ryuuko." Her voice is cracking and jittery. "I don't want to hurt you anymore. I'm dangerous, I'm just like her..."

Just like her? "What are you talking about? You didn't hurt me."

"How did I not?" She finally looks at you, her eyes already red from tears. "I had my way with you without asking for your permission. That's rape." She curls up again. "Like mother, like daughter..."

Mother? "Please, hear me out. You didn't rape me, I'm not upset with you, and nothing bad at all happened. Just... take some deep breaths, and tell me what this is about."

"It... doesn't matter." Her response is strained, forced.

You place a hand on one of her shoulders, and delicately massage it. "Satsuki, I love you more than anyone or anything in this world. My life wouldn't be half as good without you. Please, let me help you."

A long while of silence follows, as you continue to comfort Satsuki. Eventually, she turns around, looking sad, but no longer afraid.

"...I should explain why Ragyou insisted that I visit her so often."

Kiryuuin Ragyou is a monster. You've already known this to be true for a while. What you didn't know is just how true it is. As Satsuki relates her story to you, you're torn between crying and screaming. Not only does she have to dedicate her life to bringing Ragyou down, she's also forced to endure something like... this. How twisted does one have to be to see their own child as sexually desirable, let alone act on this desire?

Satsuki held this in for several years, refusing to tell anyone. She thought she could repress it, forget about it. For the most part, she succeeded. However, it all came flooding back tonight. You hate to think about it this way, but... maybe it's good that it happened. That she let it all out. Like the responsibility of carrying out her plan, she doesn't have to carry this burden alone. She has to overcome it herself, but you can and will support her every step of the way. That's what loyalty means. What love means.

Once she finishes, you lock her in a tight clasp, without a word. She responds in kind, though

it feels different from a mutual hug. She's clinging to you, relying on you to embrace her, comfort her.

"I know that nothing I can say will make this pain disappear, Satsuki.", you utter. "I'll do everything I can to ease it, though."

"I'm sorry. I ruined our first night here with... *this*.", she mumbles in response.

Mimicking her favorite gesture, you press your index finger against her lips, surprising her somewhat. "Don't be silly. I'm here for you."

"...I love you, Ryuuko."

Comfortably nestled in your arms, Satsuki doesn't take long to fall asleep. You can understand that. Telling you all this probably wore her out more than the events of the past two days. While looking at her calm face is soothing, it takes you much longer to finally succumb to sleep. You just can't understand. Why would somebody do this?

You are awoken by a gentle touch around your shoulder. Smooth fingers are brushing against your skin, causing you to shiver slightly. More effective than an alarm clock. You open your eyes to look at the perpetrator, Satsuki. Noticing you're awake, she plants a short, soft kiss on your lips.

"Good morning.", she says quietly.

"Morning." As the events of last night come back to you, you rest a hand on one of hers, looking at her with concern. "How are you feeling?"

She offers a small smile. "Better, all thanks to you. Are you well, yourself?"

"If you're fine, then so am I. I'm glad I can help you with this, even if it's just a little."

"You're the only one who can.", she whispers.

Since Satsuki doesn't seem to be in a hurry, you opt to stay in bed with her. You've always dreamt of waking up with her by your side, but nothing could've prepared you for the reality of it. Not even yesterday's events can stop you from enjoying this moment. You're not sure why she finds stroking your arms to be pleasing, but you can't complain yourself. It feels like a massage. You relax, and enjoy the treatment.

Satsuki hums in amusement. "You're like a cat, Ryuuko."

"...Huh?"

"That sound you sometimes make. Don't you think it resembles purring?"

You feel a blush wash over your face. "D-does it? I'm not doing it consciously."

"I know." She gently pets your head. "That's why it's cute."

You can't help but nuzzle into her hand, further proving her point. Not that you mind. If you're a cat, Satsuki is the best owner you could have.

You should've told Ryuuko about this back when she first asked. Had you done that, this whole issue would've been ancient history by now, you're sure. Why didn't you do it? Did you trust her enough to invade the privacy of her bedroom, but not enough to open your heart to her? Or perhaps, it was simply a lack of courage on your part? It's not an easy topic to talk about, after all.

Regardless of the reason, and what would've happened otherwise, you're here now. It's not a bad position. Having shared all of your bad memories and fears with a person whom you love deeply makes you feel... lighter, somehow. You know you're not yet truly free from this, but it's a major step forward. And it's all thanks to Ryuuko. Was she not around, you'd probably be left to stew in your anxieties on your own. She's a treasure you must never take for granted.

"Lady Satsuki?" Inumuta's voice interrupts your train of thought. "Is everything all right?"

You blink rapidly. "Yes, thank you, Inumuta." Getting lost in your thoughts during a meeting is not something you should make a habit of. "As I was saying, I would like all of you to put as much effort as you can into building your departments in the remaining four days. The plan is to achieve basic operational capability by the time the school year starts."

"About that..." Nonon raises her hand somewhat sheepishly. "I'm not sure I can get everything done by myself. Not in four days, at least."

"Then I believe Miss Vice-President has found her first task.", you say, glancing towards Ryuuko.

"Huh?" It seems she was pondering on something, as well. "Yeah, sure, I'll help."

"Does anybody else require help with their tasks?", you ask.

"Hopefully not, I can't be in two places at once.", Ryuuko cuts in. She lets out a small sigh of relief, seeing the rest shrugging and shaking their heads.

"That will be all for this meeting." You rise from your throne. "Get to work. I'm counting on you."

"Yes, ma'am!"

While the others quickly disperse, Ryuuko stays behind. "You go on ahead, Nonon. I'll catch

up to you in a sec."

She gives her a slightly suspicious look. "...Fine."

As soon as the elevator carrying Nonon downward departs, Ryuuko is next to you, gripping your hand. "You gonna be okay, Satsuki?"

You nod, smiling slightly. "Yes. Thank you for your concern." You share a small kiss before she heads off.

As for you, you have some papers to wade through. Building and maintaining a small city on an artificial island in the middle of Tokyo Bay carries a troublesome amount of legal issues with it. Even though Kiryuuin Conglomerate has the Japanese government in its pocket, the paperwork must still check out. Bureaucracy certainly is unforgiving.

Nonon's "office" down in the main building has a pretty relaxing aura to it. Or it would, if not for all the boxes lying around. Seems she hasn't finished setting everything up yet. She had enough time to set up a sofa for her to lounge on, though.

You draw her attention with a wave. "Hey. Sorry, had to ask her something."

"It's fine. About you and Satsuki... Everything alright between you after yesterday?"

Your body turns rigid. How did she- Oh. She's not talking about that. You take a deep breath, and nod.

"...Yeah, everything's fine. We talked it out, no hard feelings." Truth be told, you almost forgot you ever argued. "You okay? You seem a bit down."

She sighs. "I'm worried, I guess. First Satsuki got in an accident, then you two were at each other's throats... And we only just got here. Is every day going to be like this?"

You can see where she's coming from. It might seem like Honnouji has been a string of disasters so far, but...

"That's one way of looking at it." You lean against the couch's armrest. "True, bad stuff happened. We've always come out on top, though. I guess that's the point in this whole mission Satsuki is taking us on. It's not going to be easy, and we'll definitely get into situations we'd rather not be in, but the end result will be totally worth it."

"I had no idea you know this many words."

"Come on, don't put me down like that."

Nonon snorts. "I suppose thinking about it like that helps. Thanks."

"Anytime. So... you need me to do something?" You glance over your shoulder at her.

"I'm supposed to form the first clubs today, but the recruits are running late. Let's just wait for them."

"You sure you don't need help with those boxes?"

She sits up, and waves her hand dismissively. "Nah, I can make those slackers do it. Sit down, this'll probably take a while."

You take her up on her offer. "Sorry we haven't talked lately."

"We've all been busy those past two days." She scoots closer to you. "I hope we'll have some spare time to talk at all."

You smirk. "I never thought you'd miss me."

"...Sh-shut up."

"Love you too." You wrap an arm around her, and bring her close. Nonon's petite frame makes her really huggable. Though she seems a bit reluctant at first, soon enough she slumps against you, still with a considerable blush covering her features.

"R-Ryuuko...", she mumbles, barely above a whisper.

You lean towards her to hear better. "Hm?" It's rare of her to call you by your name.

Before she can say anything more, the door opens, and a girl slowly steps inside. Behind her are a lot more people, looking equally lost and intimidated. Nonon immediately squirms free of your embrace.

"W-who are you?" Her voice is even more high-pitched than usual.

"Excuse me... I was told we should come here." The girl looks directly at you. "...Are you Jakuzure Nonon?"

"Uh-"

"Oh!" She finally notices the real Nonon, and turns back to you. "Are you babysitting for someone?"

In the nick of time, you manage to grab the pink devil's collar, and barely withstand the sharp tug that follows.

Most of your work on this particular task is controlling Nonon's temper, it seems. As soon as she stopped trying to bite her new recruits' heads off, your involvement took a large drop. You can consider that a success on your part.

"You got non-musical clubs, too?", you ask, peeking at the paper Nonon is reading.

"Well, yeah." She crosses out the clubs already formed. "There's more to culture clubs than that."

You give the list a closer look. "...I don't see how creative writing can be used in combat. Or anything on that list, for that matter."

She shrugs. "Don't ask me. Satsuki said all clubs will be useful somehow, so I'll take her word on that."

"Well, maybe the uniforms will weaponize all those things?", you suggest. "Somehow."

Nonon raises an eyebrow, and looks back at her list. "And here I thought you're slowly wisening up. Anyway... this looks like it's going to take less time than I thought. Thanks for the help today."

You tilt your head. "What help? I didn't really do anything."

"...Well, I think you helped.", she mumbles back.

You give her a playful nudge. "What, did you find my presence inspiring?"

"...Just go." Nonon's scowl is utterly comical. In a swift motion, you slide her cap onto her eyes, give her a short, tight hug, and make off before she can recover. Weird looks from her recruits surround you, some confused, and others on the verge of bursting into laughter. You didn't do her authority any favors, that's for sure. Well, she can handle herself. Question is, will the new kids survive it?

With how little time your work took, there's no point in waltzing straight back to the tower just yet. While you really want to pamper and comfort Satsuki every waking second of the day after what she's told you last night, she needs some breathing space. Besides, she has tasks of her own. You'd be just distracting her right now.

Perhaps this is a good time to properly tour the school, and learn the layout. You've got the time, as well as a dire need to do it, considering you're the Vice-President. Lazy as you might be, this is a job you can't afford to slack off on.

If you didn't know how the structure looks like from the outside, you could easily believe you're onboard a massive ship. Everything about the interior design gives off strong maritime vibes, complete with exposed pipes running along the ceiling. Maybe it's because you practically are in the middle of the sea, or... because the main building resembles a sailor uniform. Satsuki's sense of humor can be a bit eccentric, after all.

Ignoring the thick, hatch-like doors, classrooms appear to be pretty standard fare. It seems that a student's uniform defines what class they're in, as well. No-Star classrooms look rather barebones, whereas One- and Two-Stars get considerably nicer, better equipped rooms. You can't seem to find a Three-Star classroom anywhere. Something to ask Satsuki about. It takes

you a while to tour the building, but eventually, you run out of ideas to stall your return. You're getting pretty hungry, anyway.

Your sanctuary. Your troubles seem so very distant here. A place where you can truly unwind, be yourself. These quarters were built with this purpose in mind. For you, and for Ryuuko. Without her to breathe life into it, it would be just a big, empty apartment.

You hear the sound of door opening, followed by Ryuuko's unmistakable, confident footsteps. You smile as you sink deeper into your comfortable chair, pretending not to hear her. Expectedly, she attempts to sneak up on you from behind, and covers your eyes.

"Guess who."

"Somebody who's back suspiciously soon.", you answer. "I hope I won't get any complaints from Nonon about you abandoning her in need."

She snorts, and walks around the chair to sit in your lap. "In need of attention, maybe. Turns out, she didn't really need my help all that much. She just wanted to talk."

You gladly welcome her with a peck on the lips. "I should talk to her, as well."

"Man, she'd be pissed if she found out we live together here, and she's on her own. Can't blame her, either." She wiggles around a bit, making herself comfortable. Meanwhile, you begin caressing her shoulders. You find comfort in doing so, and she seems to share this sentiment.

"I understand how you feel.", you say. "Nonon was the first friend I've made, and has been supporting me in my goal ever since. However... I wanted us to have some space for ourselves, and ourselves only. No more sneaking into bedrooms at night. Had it stayed that way, it would just become uncomfortable for both parties."

"...I guess you're right. Hell, we wouldn't even be able to sit like this." She sighs. "Still... we gotta tell her already. The longer we wait, the madder she's gonna get once she finds out. If Inumuta knows, so should she."

That is true. Even if you have to keep your love a secret, Nonon deserves to know. "Very well. We shall tell her about it tomorrow."

You are rewarded for your resolution with a fit of smooching. To tell the truth, you're not sure what will come out of this decision. Nonon's temper can be very volatile. You really shouldn't have waited so long.

"Satsuki..."

"Hmm?"

"I'm hungry."

"Well, Soroi had to leave for today, so I can-"

Ryuuko immediately springs to her feet. "Yep, I'll cook."

It's odd. Even though she enjoys your cooking, she often asks to be the one to do it instead. Maybe she wants to practice? You can't complain, however. The end result is always delicious.

You feel a bit bad for spending the majority of the day resting, but on the other hand, both of you need it. Ryuuko's gentle, caring touch is revitalizing in a way nothing else can ever be. It grants you the kind of strength and courage you could never attain on your own. That's probably what has pushed you towards making a certain decision, way earlier than you'd anticipated.

"Are you sure about this, Satsuki?", Ryuuko asks. "If you just don't like doing that kind of stuff, we don't have to. I don't need it to love you."

"My mind is made. I want to like it, Ryuuko. I know I can, but not without your help." You look straight into her eyes. "I want to enjoy sex with you."

She immediately turns red as a beet. "...Y-you didn't have to use that w-word."

You place a hand on her cheek, smiling. "I'm just honest about my desires. I already enjoy every other aspect of our relationship. Maybe I'm greedy for wanting to have it all, but... that's how I am."

"And it's up to me to satisfy that greed." She chuckles, and leads your hand to your own cheek. "If you want it, then I want it too. I'll do my best."

"I have no doubts you will succeed."

"...Thanks. Let's sit down, or something."

You sit down on the edge of your bed together. Ryuuko offers to hold your hand, and you are happy to oblige.

"Okay..." She clears her throat. "I'm not a psychologist or anything, so... I think I'll have to wing it."

You raise a brow. "Wing it?"

"Well, your problem is that doing sexy stuff reminds you of... what happened in the past, right?" She sighs. "...Sorry, I'm being insensitive. I don't know how to talk about this."

"It's alright.", you assure her. "Tiptoeing around the issue won't do any good. To answer your question... it's hard to say. I can't really put it into words myself, but I think you're close."

"I see. Uhh... Do you mind if I ask you some questions about this whole thing? You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

She's really putting a lot of effort into this. You don't like to even think about what Ragyou did to you, but if it can help your relationship with Ryuuko, you'll say everything.

"Go ahead."

Ryuuko breaks off eye contact, staring at her lap intently. "...You told me this whole thing started when you entered puberty."

You nod slowly. "That's right. Shortly after my body started showing the first signs of femininity, Ragyou... took an unhealthy interest in taking baths with me. She's been progressively getting bolder since."

You can feel the hand holding yours tighten. "...Ugh. I wanted to ask... did it happen every time she called you over?"

"That was more or less the only purpose my visits had. Occasionally, she would ask me about my recent actions, but this was the focus."

"I... wish I could've done something about this. I wish I could've protected you. I..."

"The time for revenge will come, Ryuuko.", you answer, caressing her hand. "For now, don't think about Ragyou. Think about us."

"...One last thing - did you have any control over what was going to happen?"

"No.", you answer plainly. "Though she... stimulated me sexually, she did so for her own amusement. I made some attempts to resist at first, but..."

She sighs in a mixture of sadness and frustration. "...I see. I think I understand a bit better now."

She stands up, takes a few steps away from the bed, and turns to face you.

"...Ryuuko?"

Without a word, she takes her tank top off. You watch with a mixture of bewilderment and awe as her shapely chest comes into full display. Before you can manage a response, she slides off the boy shorts she uses for sleeping.

Ryuuko is now standing stark naked before you, and blushing furiously.

"...What?", you utter.

"J-just..." She gulps, takes a deep breath, and straightens her posture. "Just do what you want. That's m-my idea."

You blink. "I don't think I understand."

"The stuff you did back then... I enjoyed it.", she admits. "You took me off-guard, sure, but before you stopped, it was awesome. Still..." She sits down next to you again, now missing her clothes. "Let's take it slow this time around. You can do what you want, and I'll let you know if I'm feeling uncomfortable."

You nod, struggling to maintain eye contact. "Thank you. Should I... take my clothes off?"

She smiles softly. "You're the boss. If you don't want to, keep 'em on."

Your nightgown can't exactly be called "clothes", but it wouldn't feel right if you didn't even the odds. As you take it off, Ryuuko averts her eyes nervously. It doesn't take long for her to look at you again, with a mixture of embarrassment and arousal painted on her face. She places her hands in her lap, wiggling her legs nervously.

"A-anyway... let's get to it, I guess... Do you want me to do something?"

"Could you... lie down?"

She nods, and moves onto the bed properly, lying down on her back. "Like this?"

Last night, you weren't really thinking what you were doing, and blindly followed your instincts. Now, you want to take a more careful look at Ryuuko's body - a perfect mixture of natural beauty and hard-earned athleticism. Long, powerful legs, with strong, yet cute feet and visibly toned muscles, beautifully transitioning into her curvy thighs and hips. An appropriately defined stomach, firm but not rigid, tastefully complimenting her well-proportioned bosom. Her athletic arms, with dexterous hands, their fingers clutching the bedsheets out of slight embarrassment. Or perhaps... need?

Finally, up from the pronounced collarbones and the sleek, flexible neck is her gorgeous face, accentuated well with a crimson hue, further proof of her embarrassment. Her expressive eyes never fail to draw your attention. The same shade of blue as yours, they possess a unique, fascinating iris pattern. Her face, an amalgamation of soft and sharp features, conveys every emotion to great effect. Truly, Matoi Ryuuko is a living work of art.

You get on the bed, moving closer to her.

"...Can I touch you?"

She rolls her eyes. "I told you, you can do what you want. You already have my permission."

Do what you want... You slowly stretch one of your hands forward, and rest it on Ryuuko's stomach. She raises a brow, but says nothing. With your fingertips, you slowly trace along

her abdomen, feeling the toned muscles underneath her skin. Suddenly, she shivers, and yelps slightly. You immediately withdraw your hand.

"I-Is something the matter, Ryuuko?", you ask.

"What? No, it's fine.", she answers, looking a bit confused. "It... tickles a bit. Really, don't worry that much. I'll tell you if it feels bad."

You smile. "I see." You place your hand back where it was. Her silky-smooth skin, paired with the firmness of her stomach is simply too much.

But, that's only one part of her. You rest both of your hands on her waist, and slowly slide them down to her hips - wide, elegant, and extremely alluring. You notice her hand briefly grip the sheets more tightly as you squeeze her firm buttocks, testing their texture. Continuing from there, you get a good feel of her thighs from the underside, eliciting a small, cute squeak from her.

You can't help but smirk. "Are you ticklish over here, as well?"

"N-no... it's a bit different here.", Ryuuko mutters.

Of course it is. Her inner thigh seems really sensitive, even though you barely skirted along its edge. But, it's not time for this yet. Your fingers travel further down, along her knees, and to her calves. Forged by your countless morning runs, they are delightful to touch. Her toes twitch a bit as you run your fingers along the soles of her feet.

"Don't t-tickle them."

You chuckle quietly. "Very well."

You move a bit closer to her torso, and lean over her, placing your hands next to her head from both sides. Her blush returns in full force as she eyes your body hungrily.

"See anything you like?"

"Y-yeah. Everything.", she mumbles.

You inch downward towards her face, slowly pressing your breasts against hers. Her dilated pupils and nervous breaths spell out her desire clearly. You stop just short of her lips.

"Then help yourself."

An expression you didn't expect runs through her features. She's conflicted, struggling internally. "...No. Not tonight.", she says. "Tonight is yours, Satsuki. You're hot as hell, and I want you bad, but... helping you is more important than what I want."

Your eyes are just short of getting watery. "I'm in love with an angel."

You take her lips by storm, and rest your upper body on hers entirely, causing her to let out a small sound of surprise. It quickly turns into a pleasured purr, as she closes her eyes and relaxes. While you savor the sensations Ryuuko's lips and mouth provide, her hands reach for yours, and intertwine fingers with them.

You pull away for air, a thin trail of saliva still linking your tongues.

"I'd like to say the same, but I'm pretty sure this falls under lust.", she quips.

"You think?"

You close in again, and force your tongue deep inside her mouth, exploring it thoroughly. While pleasant in itself, you only do it to hear the sound she makes, both cute, and enticing. All the while, you slowly move your lower body over hers. Once done, you finish the kiss, and straddle her, sitting up straight.

While her embarrassment vanished due to your earlier advances, this position seems to have successfully restored it.

"...S-Satsuki?"

"Then I suppose that makes me a demon.", you say, circling around her navel with a finger. "It's only natural that I would act like one."

You gently lift her left leg, encountering no resistance from her, and slip your right leg underneath it. After correcting your position a little to make both of you comfortable, you look at Ryuuko again. She's nervous, and somewhat tense.

"...I'm going too far, aren't I? I'm sorry, that's enough-"

"If you want it, I want it too.", Ryuuko interrupts. "I'm telling you, don't worry that much."

"You look nervous.", you insist. "I don't want you to force yourself to do this for my sake."

"I've never done this before, of course I'm nervous. I want this, Satsuki, just as much as you do." She smirks. "Maybe more, even."

"More? I wonder about that."

You adjust your position one more time, and take a deep breath. Truth be told, you have no idea what you're doing. It just feels like what you're supposed to do.

You slowly move your hips towards Ryuuko. Making contact with her is enough for a tingly feeling to course through your loins. Feeling up her body earlier has made you quite excited, and it seems it was the same for her. The restless, lust-filled look in her eyes tells you everything you need to know right now.

You take the cue, place your hands on her thighs for support, and begin to move. Slow at

first, you try to figure out a pattern. It's pretty hard to keep your mind on track, though.

Before you even know it, your hips are gyrating at a steady pace. You throw your head back and close your eyes, concentrating on the sensation. With your hands clutching Ryuuko's legs, you can feel her muscles move to the tempo you're setting. She matches it perfectly, further intensifying the resulting sensation. Her labored breaths eventually turn into moans, sensual in a way you've never heard from her before. It spurs you on to increase your speed, and with it, the pleasure. You feel Ryuuko's fingers longingly grasp one of your hands, and respond in kind.

"Satsuki...!"

"Ryuuko..."

Though you only manage to utter each other's names, it feels like so much more than than that. Everything about you, her, and the two of you together - that's what you heard.

The climactic quivers subside, and you are left with an overwhelming feeling of pleasant fatigue. With the last bit of strength left, you untangle your legs from Ryuuko's, and slump on top of her. A slow, sloppy kiss is all you can manage at this point. It still feels incredible.

With neither of you willing to break the blissful silence, your eyes slowly become harder to keep open. Not even bothering to put your clothes back on, you cover yourselves with a blanket, and let sleepiness overcome you. Ryuuko's naked body closely pressed to yours offers a level of comfort you've never felt before.

It's completely worth the stuffy nose and sore throat you wake up with the next morning.

You're glad everyone is doing fine without your help, but not having anything to do whatsoever makes you feel a bit useless. You'll probably miss this state of affairs as soon as the year begins properly, but for now, you're bored out of your mind. Satsuki's not even here, leaving you to blankly stare at a wall.

On the bright side, you have a lot to daydream about. Sex was a great experience in itself, but the really amazing part came afterwards. You've never felt as intimate with Satsuki as when cuddling in the nude. The softness and warmth of her bare skin beats even the most

expensive of fabrics. If you close your eyes, you can still feel it...

"Don't drool on my hair."

"Eh?!" You shake yourself awake, to find that Nonon is sitting in your lap. "When did you get here? I just closed my eyes a moment ago..."

"That's one long moment. I came here like fifteen minutes ago.", she answers. "You were already asleep by then."

"Oh, man... Has Satsuki come by?"

Before a single word can leave Nonon's mouth, a loud clack draws your attention to the entrance.

"I have."

The new uniform takes you completely off-guard, but it's not an unwelcome change at all. Finally, an outfit dignified and elegant enough for Satsuki to wear. You find it difficult to say what it's based on. Some sort of military pantsuit? You can definitely see some sailor uniform in it. Even more elegant than the garment itself is the way it clings to Satsuki's body. Though, while 'elegant' is definitely an applicable term here, 'hot' probably describes your opinion more accurately. Maybe clothes aren't so bad, after all.

"Wow.", Nonon whispers. Yes, that about sums it up.

Satsuki slowly walks in your direction, her metal heels clicking even against the carpet. You've never seen her wear this kind of shoes before, but they really suit her. Judging by how confident her step is, she's been practicing on the side. Nobody could achieve such perfect balance on heels as high as these without prior practice, not even her.

"I'm not surprised to see Ryuuko slack off, but I expected better from you, Nonon."

"What can I say? She's a bad influence." The two of you share a chuckle at that.

Satsuki smirks. "I can only hope this influence won't spread across the whole academy."

"With you looking as sharp as this, I'm sure you can keep us in check.", you answer.

"Oh?" She glances down at her outfit as if she's only just noticed it. "Iori is to thank for that."

"Guess he can do something right, after all.", Nonon says. "Are ours done yet?"

"Not for a while longer. Mine was first in line, since it contains no Life Fibers."

You raise a brow. "Wait... no Life Fibers?"

"Bakuzan is sufficient for me." Her eyes tell a different story. It's understandable - she's

probably reluctant to wear Life Fibers after what happened. Either way, it's not like what she said isn't true.

Silence follows as Satsuki sits down in her armchair. Her slight frown tells you exactly what she's thinking – Nonon is here, and she needs to know. How should you do it, though? You haven't even thought about it that much.

"Nonon." Satsuki takes the initiative. "Are you sure you're done with your tasks for today?"

"Nothing's left they can't handle on their own. ...I hope." Nonon twiddles her thumbs nervously at that last bit.

"I see. In that case... Ryuuko and I would like to talk to you. It's important."

"Sure. What is it?"

Satsuki rises to her feet. "I would prefer if we discussed this in private."

With every step taken towards the door to "Satsuki's quarters", your legs feel more and more like jelly. Even Satsuki looks a bit stiff. You can tell that pulling the door open comes with some difficulty to her.

"That's... quite the place.", Nonon notes, shyly stepping inside. She surveys the large living room. "Wait, that door..."

Your door. She's figured it out faster than you did the first time you came here. Upon investigating, she turns to you again, equal parts confused and crestfallen.

"Is this what you wanted to tell me about? That you share your quarters, and I'm alone?" The hint of frustration in her voice indicates an oncoming storm. "Or did you think I'll just ignore it or not notice?"

"...While it's not the subject matter, it's related.", Satsuki answers.

"Related? Related how?"

"You see..." Satsuki trails off, and sends a pleading look your way. It's up to you.

"Nonon..." Your mouth feels dry as a desert. "We're... in love."

"Huh?"

"Satsuki and I, I m-mean."

Nonon blinks a few more times, completely dumbfounded by your words. Just when you consider adding something, she hangs her head low, her bangs obscuring her face.

"How long." Completely devoid of tone or emotion, it doesn't sound like a question. It barely

even sounds like Nonon. Something tells you that's not a good thing.

"A-are you mad with us?"

"How. Long.", she drawls.

Satsuki takes a deep breath. "We have been a couple for over a year now."

"Over a year." There is something deeply unsettling about the way Nonon mimics the tone. "And you didn't think to tell me about it?"

"We have!", you quickly cut in.

"If word of our relationship got out, it would draw unnecessary attention from Ragyou.", Satsuki explains. "We were determined to keep it a secret from everyone."

"Oh, I see." Nonon sharply raises her head, revealing just how contorted with anger her face is. "You just didn't trust me enough to tell me, huh?!"

"No, that's not what-"

"Yes it is! You were scared I would let it slip!" She slams her fist against a wall. "I revered you, Satsuki! I've followed you since we were little kids, but now I see you never gave a damn about me to begin with!"

"Nonon... don't say that."

"Ever since Ryuuko came along, she's been all you care about. So special, so talented! And me? I wasn't even important enough for you to tell me you're going to Kanagawa!"

Satsuki looks like she's about to cry. It's time for you to step in.

"Nonon, please. We know we screwed up, and we're really sorry. We should've told you this long ago."

"But you didn't!", she immediately parries. "And to make it even worse, you..." Tears slowly trickle down her cheeks. "Why did you pretend to care about me if you already have Satsuki?"

You blink. "W-what? I wasn't pretending! We're friends, of course I care about you! What does Satsuki have to do with that?"

You can immediately tell that's not what she wanted to hear. She takes a step back, and hangs her head low again.

"...Everything."

"What do you m-" The moment you open your mouth, Nonon darts towards the exit. "Wait!"

No, there's no point in chasing her. You understand what she meant already. Right now, nothing you can do will calm her down.

This hallway feels incredibly long right now. You just want to get away from here, and get someplace else. Somewhere lonely and quiet.

From behind you, you hear a loud stomp, followed by Ryuuko's voice. "...I'm such an idiot!"

You can't help but derive grim satisfaction from her frustration. Maybe that'll teach her to toy with your feelings. You continue towards the door, and step inside the tower's central room.

Inumuta, the only person present, fixes his gaze on you. "Somebody looks upset."

"None of your business.", you growl, turning towards your own quarters. You just want to be alone.

"Perhaps so, but I can't help but notice you just stomped out of Lady Satsuki's private chambers." He adjusts his glasses, staring at you inquisitively.

"Yeah, so what?! She's my fr-" The word gets stuck in your throat like a fish bone. "J-just leave me alone!" Not waiting for a response, you run to your door, and slam it behind you.

Once inside, you rest your back against a wall, exhaling heavily. Finally, nobody to bother you. You kick your shoes off, and walk straight to your bed, falling face first on the pillow.

Friend? Can you honestly still call her that? It wasn't as noticeable to you at the time, but in retrospect, ever since she joined Satsuki, Ryuuko has been more important to her. You have to admit it wasn't without a reason, though. She was the training partner Satsuki has longed for; somebody who could keep up with her. Not only that, she has also proven herself to be loyal and skillful throughout Satsuki's middle school conquest.

It really makes you wonder – what about you? When was the last time you contributed to Satsuki's cause in a meaningful way? All you've ever done is follow her and occasionally order some students around in her name. Sure, your current position seems to be an important one, but... Up until now, haven't you been more of a burden to carry than an actual asset? How can you be sure you'll be of any more use now? Even if she wasn't already dating Satsuki, would Ryuuko even want to be with somebody like you?

Maybe you shouldn't have followed them to Kanagawa after all. They'd be better off without you.

It's all painfully obvious, now that you think about it. Nonon has been trying to get closer to you, but you were somehow too blind to notice.

"I... had no idea that's how she felt about me. I kept leading her on without realizing..." You stomp your foot in frustration. "I'm such an idiot!"

Satsuki promptly places a hand on your shoulder. "You didn't know. It's not your fault, Ryuuko. " She sighs. "...The guilt is all mine. I was paranoid, and to make it worse, neglected my oldest friendship. If anybody is an idiot here, it's me."

You pull her into a hug. "Let's not turn this into a self-deprecation contest. We screwed up, and we gotta fix it."

"We can agree on that."

A good minute of silence passes before you let go of each other. You're still worried, but a mere touch like this from Satsuki is enough to make all this easier to stand.

Suddenly, the phone in the back of the room starts to ring. You raise an eyebrow at Satsuki, who responds in kind.

"I'll get it." You quickly walk over to the phone, and pick it up. "Hello?"

"Hm? Was I perhaps given the wrong number?" The woman's low, surly voice sends chills down your spine, and across your whole body. This is no ordinary person you're talking to.

"Um... who is this?" Something compels you to voice the question as meekly as possible.

"No, can't be." She continues to talk to herself. "Satsuki doesn't make mistakes like that."

Satsuki? Covering the microphone with your hand, you hand the receiver to her. "I-It's for you."

"Yes? This is Satsuki." Her expression immediately stiffens upon hearing the voice on the other end. "...Yes, it's good to hear from you again, mother."

You almost choke on your own saliva. That was Ragyou?

"Forgive my subordinate. I was instructing her on her tasks when you called, and she was a bit too eager to help."

You listen to the conversation in complete silence, all the while giving Satsuki the best guilty look you can manage. Hopefully your misstep won't get her in trouble. Finally, she sets the receiver down, her expression looking a bit darker than before.

You bow deeply before her. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! That was really dumb of me!"

"Don't worry." She grabs your hand, leading you towards the couch. "She didn't give it any thought. I do have some unpleasant news, however." The two of you sit down.

"W-what is it?"

Satsuki sighs. "Ragyou will take part in the inauguration ceremony. As the de facto owner of the school, she wants to give a speech."

You huddle closer to her, placing a hand in her lap. "...You gonna be okay?"

She gives you a small smile. "It's just a minor inconvenience. She loves to demonstrate her authority."

"Right. Sorry if I worry too much."

"Don't be. I really appreciate it." Satsuki moves her hand over yours, and twines their fingers together. Resting her weight against you, she closes her eyes.

"...I-I'm glad."

'Honored' doesn't even begin to describe how you feel about the amount of trust Satsuki puts in you. It's probably not the same category of feeling, anyway. She's not as much your queen as she is... your family, more so than your neglectful father. It seems only natural that you would trust each other, but that doesn't mean you take it for granted. No, it's something to be nurtured and cherished.

Satsuki is not your only family, though, even if she is the closest to you.

"About Nonon...", you sound off. "What do we do now?"

Satsuki frowns as she opens her eyes to look at you. "...I suppose we need to give her some time to calm down and think this over."

"Yeah... once you get her going, there's no reasoning with her until she gets tired." You chuckle weakly. "So, we're gonna wait for her to come back here?"

"I doubt she will. Waiting for her in the Student Council office would be a better idea. Assuming she went to her quarters, she will have to pass through there eventually."

"Somebody kill me already..."

Of course, there's nobody here to answer that plea. Just you, and your painfully gurgling abdomen. Turns out, consuming a liter of ice cream is only good stress relief for as long as it takes for it to settle in your stomach. That is to say, not very long. This is quite possibly the most miserable you've ever been in your life – both in body and spirit.

Satsuki was first. Well, not like it would matter much if she was second, either. After all, you wouldn't blame Ryuuko for choosing just about anybody over you, and Satsuki is far from 'just about anybody'. They're both beautiful, talented, driven... they deserve each other. Yet,

part of you wants to resent them for it. Why do they get to be together, while you're alone? Is that in any way fair?

As if in protest, something churns in your gut. That's an extremely selfish way of looking at it. After all, have you ever done anything for either of them that would justify such demands? You've always just... been there. Nothing less, but nothing more, either. Even your feelings for Ryuuko never reached her until now purely because of your idleness. Simply useless.

So, why did they even bring you here? Out of pity, a sense of obligation? It's not like they had anything to tell them you would be any more useful than you've been thus far. Maybe you're being a burden to them, but they don't want to admit it outright? This whole mission Satsuki is on - perhaps you're just not cut out for it?

However, you did make a promise. You told her you would hold her hand forever; go wherever she goes, and support her in any way you can. On one hand, breaking that promise is the last thing you want to do, but on the other... is there any point to it if you're just being a drag? Wouldn't breaking the promise help Satsuki more than keeping it?

That could be the case. Maybe you should-
"Ughh..." ...go to the infirmary. All of this will be easier to think about once you stop feeling like you're dying.

You slowly get out of the bed and on your feet, hunching to minimize the pain. This is worse than the time you joined Ryuuko and Satsuki for a full day of training – at least back then, the aching muscles felt oddly good. Ice cream brings only anguish.

Slowly, you waddle to the door, and out of your quarters. By now, you know the school's layout pretty well, so getting to the infirmary shouldn't take long. You'll need to go down to the third floor first...

"Nonon."

Satsuki's voice turns your every muscle to stone, and sends another surge of pain through your guts. You slowly turn to face her, and notice Ryuuko is present as well.

"Listen, we won't force you if you don't want to, but... could we talk?", the latter pleads. Perfect timing.

"...Does it really have to be now?", you mutter through clenched teeth, trying your best to keep your stomach's contents in.

"...No, it's fine. Whenever you're ready." Ryuuko hangs her head in dejection. "Are you okay, though? You look pretty pale."

"I'm fine, I just need some-" You clutch your mouth as a wave of your stomach's contents suddenly threatens to escape your throat. It doesn't taste nearly as nice as it did on the way in. By the time you regain your bearings, Satsuki and Ryuuko are already by your side.

"Nonon, what happened?", Satsuki asks. "You really don't look well."

"...Bubblegum ice cream, a lot of it.", you mumble. "Was trying to make myself feel better..."

Ryuuko sighs. "And you swallowed the gum."

You look away. "...Yeah. Look, I'll be fine, I was just about to go to the infirmary."

"That's far away from here. If it's just indigestion, we can help you with it.", Satsuki offers.

Help you? "No, it's okay, really. I don't want to be a burden after throwing a tantrum like that..."

Ryuuko rests a hand on your shoulder. "Nonon, we owe you a lot more than that. Not only that, we want to help you. But, given what happened, if you don't want us to, that's fine."

Do you want them to help you? Rather, do you deserve it? ...Even if you don't, the thought of being coddled by the two sounds enticing, if selfish. Well, they did lie to you... Not to mention, standing here and thinking about it doesn't make your stomach feel any better.

"Yeah... I'm just being a stubborn idiot, sorry. I'd be... really glad if you h-helped me." Despite the pain, you manage a slight blush.

Ryuuko grins. "Say no more."

Before you know it, you find yourself being princess carried to their quarters. You really can't stay mad at them. Yourself, though... That's a different story.

Once in the living room, Ryuuko gently sets you down on the couch, making sure you have a pillow to rest your head on. Soon afterwards, Soroi brings you a cup of mint tea, with a scent and taste so chilling, it almost trumps how hot it is. Ryuuko and Satsuki sit down on nearby chairs, and silently watch you drink. They obviously care about your well-being, but the atmosphere is still quite tense. You finish your tea, and set the cup down.

"I..." You want to apologize, but you just can't bring yourself to do it. You need more time.

Ryuuko gets up, only to sit down on the floor next to the couch. "Feeling better?"

"A bit, I guess." It's difficult for you to meet her eyes. "Thanks."

"Does it still hurt?", Satsuki inquires.

"Yeah." The answer escapes your mouth faster than you expected it to. "I-I mean... not as much as before."

"Well, it might take a while.", Ryuuko says. "Just take it easy for now."

"Nonon..." Satsuki approaches you as well, sitting down on the armrest opposite to your

head. "We're truly sorry. I wouldn't hold it against you if you didn't want to consider us your friends after this. We don't deserve it."

You blink. "...Huh? T-that's... that's my line!"

"...What?" Ryuuko and Satsuki look at you in a state of deep confusion.

"I... thought you didn't tell me because you didn't want me around."

The two continue to stare at you for a while, before glancing at each other.

"You told her something like that?", Ryuuko asks.

"Of course not! Why wouldn't I want her around?" Satsuki turns to you. "What gave you this idea, Nonon?"

"Well... I haven't been useful in your plan, have I? It just feels like I'm tagging along..." You sigh. "I promised I would hold your hand, Satsuki, but what good is that if I can't keep up with you? I'm just slowing you down, so-"

You are interrupted by Ryuuko's frustrated groan. "Seriously, is everyone in the mood for giving themselves unwarranted crap today?" She crosses her arms and glares at you and Satsuki. "You two say one more bad word about yourselves, and I'll punch you on your own behalf."

Satsuki stifles a chuckle, and relocates from the armrest to the couch itself, near your legs.

"Nonon, our friendship is extremely valuable to me, and I deeply regret neglecting it for so long. There is something you need to understand, however, though it might sound... crude."

"...W-what is it?" You don't like the way she worded this.

"If I didn't think you can handle supporting me in my mission, I wouldn't have accepted your help.", she answers. "I wouldn't want to needlessly put a friend in danger like that."

"So... you thought I can handle it?"

She nods slowly with a smile. "And I still do. The position I've appointed you to is not random – it's where your talent for organization and leadership will shine."

"M-my talent? I-"

Ryuuko swiftly covers your mouth. "Uh-uh. You have a talent, deal with it."

You sigh through your nose, prompting her to withdraw her hand with a grin. What Satsuki said was indeed a bit blunt, but definitely reassuring. How did you manage to convince yourself they don't want you around in the first place?

You smile weakly at Satsuki. "Thanks. I hope I won't disappoint you."

She smiles back. "While I expect much of you, I am confident that you won't. Now..." She rises to her feet. "I still have some formalities to finalize, which regrettably means paperwork. You can find me in the study if the need arises." You and Ryuuko watch as Satsuki walks off, and closes the door behind her.

Ryuuko snickers. "I bet she thinks that was smooth."

"Hey, she's made a lot of progress in social interaction." Satsuki has definitely become less difficult to talk to.

"So... how's that stomach of yours? Looks to me like you forgot about it."

"Better than before, but... still not quite good." You'd probably be back to feeling like crap if you moved from the couch.

"Hm. How about..." She gently lays a hand on your abdomen. "I-if you don't mind, of course."

Your eyes drift away from her as far as possible. "N-no, go ahead."

With great care, Ryuuko lifts your shirt a bit, and rests her fingers on your bare skin. You flinch ever so slightly, still more than you would've liked to.

Her reaction is immediate. "Should I stop? I understand if you're uncomfortable."

"I-it's fine!", you assure her. "Really."

"Okay then."

Her hand begins making circular motions around your navel, applying the slightest bit of pressure. The delicate touch is surprisingly pleasant. Combined with Ryuuko's soft smile, it quickly puts you at ease. That is, until something begins to gurgle.

"S-sorry...", you mumble, blushing in shame.

"Don't worry about it. It means it's working. Just relax."

Such behavior from Ryuuko seems almost out of character. And yet... you like this side of her. Hell, you like all sides of her. Even the one that constantly bickers with you. Every bit of her.

"Ryuuko, I..." You trail off with a sigh. Is 'I love you' really what you want to say? It seems a bit more complicated than that. Maybe...

"Hm? You were saying something."

"Yes, but... it wasn't what I meant to say. The same applies to what I said earlier, right before running away from you."

"...Your feelings?" Ryuuko's hand trembles, and stops.

You nod. "I was confused. I thought that Satsuki is getting in the way of my feelings for you, but that's not true at all." You sit up, no longer feeling any pain in your stomach. "A long time ago, I've made a promise to her, and now... I want to extend that promise to you, too."

You reach for Ryuuko's hand, and grip it tightly. Directing every ounce of determination you have into your gaze, you utter the words.

"Ryuuko, I will hold your hand. Forever. Not with both of mine, though – the other belongs to Satsuki. I will support you in any way I can, with all of my strength. I only ask for one thing in exchange."

Ryuuko blinks, completely taken aback by your declaration. "A-and that is...?"

You lean forward, your lips nearly touching her ear, and whisper a few words. She smiles, and embraces you tightly.

"Of course."

"And remember - Satsuki was my friend first. If you ever hurt her, I'll gut you."

"Now that's the Nonon I know."

Sanageyama sighs. "All I'm saying is it's a hassle. Each club has different needs, so I have to go over all of them."

"Think of it this way. You only need to do this once, and then you're set.", you say. "For the year, at least."

"Guess so. Thanks for the help today. Doubt I'd be able to get it done myself."

"Well, I had to help, whether I like it or not." You chuckle. "On that topic, the nerd and Nonon needed me today, too. I gotta get to them soon."

"What about Gamagoori? Handling everything by himself?"

"He insists he doesn't need help. Something to do with pride?" You shrug. "I don't think he likes me that much."

Sanageyama grins. "You probably don't fit his image of Vice-President."

"He's gonna have to learn to live with that eventually. If it comes down to it, I can always remind him one of the reasons why Satsuki trusts me." You lightly tap Kaizan's scabbard against the floor a few times.

"...Whoa. Sounds to me like you're itching to rough him up."

You shake your head. "It's not that. I know he means well, but the way he goes about it pisses me off sometimes. In the end, Satsuki picked him, and I trust her judgement. I just hope he remembers to do the same."

"Eh, starting soon, he'll probably be too busy yelling at students to bother you."

"Here's hoping." You pull out your phone to check the time. "Anyway, I gotta run if I am to help the other two. See you later." You wave to Sanageyama, and head off towards the school building.

Suddenly, you feel a hand on your shoulder, stopping you in place. "Wait, Matoi."

You turn to look at Sanageyama. "Huh?"

"The two of us, we, uh... I know you're busy, but..."

Oh, no. He's not going to do it, is he? What will you tell him?

"We need to spar sometime!", he finally says. "I want to see the how powerful Lady Satsuki's right hand is!"

You blink a few times. "...Oh. Sure, why not. Can't be now, though. Satsuki will have my head if the others don't make it on time."

"No, no, I know. Once all this inauguration stuff blows over, just swing by the main gym when you have the time, okay?"

"You got yourself a deal, Sanageyama." Smirking, you extend a hand for him to shake, which he does. "Pretty sure you'll regret it, though."

He smiles in kind. "We'll see about that. Anyway, sorry to keep you."

Today was pretty draining. With a yawn, you rest your head on Satsuki's shoulder, peeking at

the book in her hand.

"What're you reading, anyway?"

"Iori provided me with a compilation of data about Life Fibers.", she answers. "Frankly, a lot of this goes over my head."

"Too tough for you? No way."

She smiles. "There is only so much knowledge I can absorb at one time. Some of the things here require an advanced understanding of biology to comprehend. I'm afraid I had to prioritize our physical training over that, but I do intend to catch up at some point."

"Makes sense."

"You should read it, once I'm done with it.", she suggests. "You too, Nonon. And be sure to pass it around the rest of the Student Council. Knowing is half the battle."

"And the other half is violence." You chuckle as Satsuki ruffles your hair. "I'll check it out, but if not even you get it all, what chance do I have?"

"Let's read it together.", Nonon sounds off. "I can spell the difficult words for you."

"Very funny." You look to Satsuki for support, only to see her concealing a smile. "Come on, Satsuki, I thought you're on my side."

"We're all on the same side." How diplomatic of her.

"Mhm." You yawn. The softness of the couch, combined with the warmth of Nonon in your lap and Satsuki at your side aren't helping you stay awake, either. As your eyelids get heavier and heavier, you wrap your arms around Nonon's waist, and nuzzle some more into Satsuki's shoulder.

A tranquil moment. One to cherish. It really makes you regret not opening up to Nonon sooner. Your plan must succeed, but from now on, you will make doubly sure it does not affect your friendships even a miniscule bit more than it is necessary. As you've learned, the line between caution and paranoia can get dangerously thin.

Was it just fear that guided your judgement, though? Perhaps you wanted your love to remain a closely kept secret merely for the feeling of intimacy that provided? Cowardice and selfishness? What a great friend you are. That is why you must strive to better yourself. Not just as a soldier on a quest against your mother, but as a person.

You turn over a page in the book. Life Fibers... what is their endgame? All you have to go by are your father's words: following the fibers' bidding, Ragyou wishes to enact a plan that will endanger all life on Earth. It's as menacing as it is unclear. Why would a parasitic species

seek a total annihilation of its hosts?

While to a five year old it made perfect sense, you've grown to question this explanation over time. Not your purpose in all this, of course – regardless of the specifics of Ragyou's plan, it is obvious she must be stopped and punished for her crimes. However... your father must've been operating on incomplete information, himself. Manipulative as they are, you find it impossible to believe the Life Fibers could've completely subjugated somebody of Ragyou's caliber. There has to be something in it for her. But what?

Ultimately, it doesn't really matter. If you come across the information, you'll take it, but you're not about to risk your plan's integrity to satisfy your curiosity. The only knowledge on your enemies you truly need is how to defeat them, and in the case of Life Fibers – how to use them against their own kin.

To that end, this book will be helpful. It seems Iori is exploring every possible angle when it comes to damaging Life Fibers, from simple cutting to more elaborate methods such as sonic attacks. While all of this will no doubt take a lot more research before it can be effectively used, that is not an issue. You have both the time and the resources. All that's left is putting them to good use.

Minutes slowly go by as you read. This is quite a lot to take in, but most of it doesn't seem immediately useful on the battlefield. Still, knowledge is knowledge. Not all of it might turn out to be useful, but some certainly will.

You glance up at the clock. It's about time. Iori asked you and the Student Council members to visit the laboratory this afternoon. You can guess what the occasion is. You start trying to wake Ryuuko up by gently patting her cheek.

After a while, she stirs, and cracks her eyes open. "Hmm?"

"That's enough sleep for now.", you say. "It's time."

"...Fine." She straightens out, causing Nonon to wake up as well.

Expectedly, she is not amused. "...What?"

"Satsuki says we gotta get up."

She turns around in Ryuuko's lap and clutches her torso, closely resembling a pink koala. "Then carry me."

"What?"

"I don't want to get up, so carry me there like this."

Ryuuko throws a confused glance in your direction, to which you shrug slightly. The situation is certainly amusing.

"...Okay then." She slowly rises to her feet, grabbing onto Nonon's back and... lower back to better support her weight. "Good to go."

While the position leaves Nonon understandably embarrassed, she remains silent. She must be enjoying herself too much to object.

"Just so you know, if Inumuta tries to take a picture or something, I won't stop him.", Ryuuko adds. "I'd like a copy of that, in fact."

After another dose of grumbling, Nonon is finally on her feet.

"So, he got the uniforms done?", she asks. "I hope they won't try to eat anyone this time."

"Don't blame Iori for this.", you say. "He warned me of the risks. The fault lies with me."

"C'mon, let's not talk about that anymore.", Ryuuko cuts in, patting you two on the shoulders. "It'll be fine."

You're not sure if that's true, but it's the best approach you can take at the moment. Whatever the reason might be, you're apparently extremely resistant to Life Fibers, so you don't have to worry about your safety. If anybody else is in danger, you will step in.

You make your way to the lab, picking up the rest of the council on the way. It's really lively in here today, with all of the huge sewing machines working on something.

"I can barely hear myself think.", Nonon calls out, covering her ears.

"It was worse yesterday.", Iori replies, approaching you. "If everyone is here, we can begin. Follow me."

He leads you to a different part of the lab, with large wardrobes suspended next to the catwalk, and what looks like changing rooms nearby.

"Your uniforms are inside, ready to be worn." He motions towards the wardrobes. "However, before you try them on, I want you to be aware of a few things."

"You're gonna lecture us on wearing clothes?", Sanageyama chimes in.

Iori furrows his brows. "Yes, that is exactly what I'm going to do. Life Fiber clothing is a useful, but dangerous tool. If you don't know how to use it properly, you could wind up dead."

"...Oh."

"If we're done with stupid questions... Aside from the test, have any of you ever worn Life Fibers before?"

Nobody raises a hand. Something compels you to do it, but... why? Have you ever worn anything of that sort? No, of course not.

Iori nods. "I see. Maybe I should begin with a little demonstration." He looks around, and points to a rather large crate. "Gamagoori, could you try lifting that?"

Gamagoori raises a brow at the request, but approaches the crate nonetheless. He grabs it by the sides, and starts pulling up. Despite his rapidly reddening face, the container budges only slightly.

"That's enough.", Iori says.

"...What's in this box?", Gamagoori asks, catching sharp breaths.

"Spare parts for those sewing machines down there. Roughly 350 kg. I'm impressed you got it to move at all. Now..." He moves over to the crate himself, and assumes the same position as Gamagoori before him.

Nonon snickers. "You can't be serious."

He doesn't grace her with a response, and instead... lifts the box. It's evident he's putting a lot of effort into it, but it's in his hands. Before you even realize it, your jaw hangs open.

"What the f..." Sanageyama stops himself, remembering about Satsuki's presence.

With a loud wheeze, Iori sets down the box. "...Life Fibers."

"How?", is all you can utter.

He straightens out, and points at his labcoat. "I'm wearing an Ultima Uniform. The energy generated by the Life Fibers imbues the wearer's body, allowing them for various feats beyond their normal limits, both physical and mental. The effects can be adjusted to maximize gains in certain fields, of course. Mine is mostly a utility uniform, increasing sewing efficiency."

"I thought Life Fibers are space parasites, not some magic threads.", you pipe up.

"They are parasites, yes. Parasites turned symbiotes thanks to science. Well... almost."

"What do you mean, *almost*?", Nonon asks. You can tell what she's getting at.

Iori pushes his glasses up. "They are still parasites in that they feed off your body's bioelectricity. However, we can make them give a lot more than they take. So long as you're wearing an amount tolerated by your body, you will not experience any negative effects."

"So what was that talk about possibly dying? Are you going to give us more than we can take?"

"No, that's not it. Other than your body's inherent resistance, there is another important factor, willpower. Life Fibers are highly sensitive to the inner workings of your mind. You must remember that you are in control – you are wearing the Life Fibers, not the other way around. If you lose sight of that, well..." Iori sighs. "It could be a problem."

Gamagoori grunts. "Are you trying to intimidate us?"

"Nothing of the sort. I need you to be aware of the dangers. There is only so much I can tell you, though. You will have to figure out most of it yourself, instinctually. It's difficult to put in words."

He's right. Wearing the uniforms during the test was somewhat of an otherworldly experience that you can't quite formulate even in your mind. You probably just need to get a good grasp on it.

"Wear the uniform, don't die, figure everything out ourselves.", Inumuta recites, looking at his phone. "Anything else to keep in mind?" Always with the smirk.

Iori scowls at him. "...Yes." He reaches into his pocket, and pulls out a small remote. With the press of a button, the five wardrobes swing open.

"The uniforms themselves. Three-Stars, and a Four-Star for Matoi. And before you complain, I know you can take more. Lady Satsuki and I have decided that we'd like to avoid any more accidents."

You look to the side. "...Makes sense." He saw right through you.

"Well, then. Try them on, see if they fit. I'm pretty sure they do, but we can always make some adjustments. Any problems, let me know." He jabs his thumb in the air behind him. "Changing rooms are over there."

You approach the wardrobe containing your uniform. You expected something akin to Satsuki's new outfit, but this is different. A slick design, based on a male school uniform, complete with a pair of shoes. A lot of metallic accents. Aside from the four stars on the front, what distinguishes it the most are the inverted colors. While the other uniforms are white with black stars, yours is the opposite.

"Hey, Iori.", you call him over. "Won't it be really uncomfortable to wear with all this metal?"

"It's not metal. Look."

He grabs a sleeve, and folds it in half with no issue. The steel-looking cuffs bend just like the rest of the fabric, with only a bit more resistance. As he releases it, it returns to its original shape.

You blink. "...Eh?"

"With sufficient know-how, Life Fibers can be made to resemble almost any material.", he explains. "They are easily the most versatile substance known."

"Pretty awesome. Sucks we can't get along with them.", you say. "Anyway, why-"

"Save the rest for after you've tried it on.", Iori cuts in, stretching out a hand in the direction of the dressing rooms.

"Fine, fine." He's not the easiest person to talk to.

You approach the wardrobe, and take the uniform out. The fabric is really nice to touch, while the parts imitating metal, despite their flexibility, feel like actual metal. Will take some time getting used to.

"Ryuuko..."

A quick glance in Nonon's direction reveals what the problem is: the hanger on which her new uniform is suspended is just slightly out of her reach. You nod, and grab the outfit for her. The big hat it comes with catches your attention. There's something embedded on it. A skull, covered in pink material. It's small, and definitely not human in shape.

"W-Wait, Nonon...", you slowly look back at her, color draining from your face. "This isn't..."

"I'll explain over there." She grabs your hand, leading you to a changing room. It's pretty small, but enough for two people.

"Then...?"

"...Not exactly. It's a mold. I didn't bring her to Kanagawa because she got sick. Didn't want to bother you two with it." She takes the hat from you, and looks at the skull. "I asked Iori to do this. I guess that way, we can still be together."

It's hard to say anything in situations like this. Thus, you say nothing, and only hug her from behind. She leans on you slightly, and sniffs a few times.

"...Do you think she's happy with this?"

"Of course. Your head's her favorite spot, after all. And, Nonon..." You take the hat from her hands, and place it on her head. "Don't think your problems are a 'bother'. You're important to us."

"Hey, what's taking you two so long?" Sanageyama's head pops through the curtain, and vanishes just as quickly. "O-oh."

Within seconds, your hug changes into a grapple as Nonon tries to pull you towards him.

"Let me go! I'll fucking kill him!"

"That's exactly what I'm worried about."

As you did get quite sidetracked, the two of you hastily change, and find your new uniforms a perfect fit. Nonon's outfit doesn't exactly exert authority, but it suits her perfectly. A one piece dress with a frilly skirt, light blue instead of white, matching boots on a slight heel, and the huge hat. You're not sure if it makes her look taller, or even tinier. The uniform lacks the metallic accents the others have, with the occasional musical motif taking their place. She looks not unlike a marching band conductor. A really cute marching band conductor.

You, on the other hand, look more like an ornamented delinquent than a Student Council representative. Still, you must admit there is a certain feeling of authority about the uniform. You'll need to wear some matching shirts, though. The middle school uniform top doesn't look too good under the jacket.

"You really don't give Iori enough credit.", you say, looking at yourself and Nonon in the mirror. "Those are sweet."

"I know he knows his stuff when it comes to design. Wouldn't have trusted him with this otherwise." She motions to the hat. "I'm still not sure about those Life Fibers, though."

"Can't blame you. But now you sound like you've known him for a while."

"Since kindergarten, actually. He went to our elementary school too, just in a different class. Don't remember him?"

You cup your chin, thinking. "...Nope. Then again, I don't remember a lot from there to begin with, other than training."

"Could you please reminisce about your childhood later, and hurry up already?", Iori's voice calls out from behind the curtain. "And for the record, I do remember you. You haven't matured one bit."

"That's not true!", Nonon jumps to your defense. "She grew boobs." ...Or not.

"Not the kind of maturing I had in mind."

You finally leave the changing room, and join the others. The guys' uniforms are pretty well designed, too – befitting of their positions and characters. One detail's off, though...

"Before you continue, Iori." Satsuki steps forward and looks over the five of you. "Ryuuko, Sanageyama. I don't want to see you wearing those with your uniforms ever again. Is that understood?"

You glance at Sanageyama's "BAD BOY" shirt, and your old uniform's top. No room for excuses.

"Yes, ma'am...", you both reply, with a dose of shame to your voices.

"Good." She steps back, making way for Iori.

"I take it from the lack of complaints that all uniforms fit as they should.", he says. "In that case, there is one more thing we need to go over: using the Life Fibers' power."

You grin. "Finally, the fun part."

"...If you want to call it that. The primary difference between your uniforms and the ones worn by lower-ranked students is that yours don't constantly put out all of their power. They need to be activated first."

Nonon looks over her outfit. "I don't see a switch on it anywhere."

"The switch..." Iori points to his head. "...is here. Remember what I said about willpower? You have to will the uniform into activating. It might be difficult at first, but you'll get a hang of it. Any volunteers to try first?"

You wave your hand energetically, eager to give it a shot. The uniform's neat, but what can it do?

"Alright, Matoi. You need to concentrate, and think about it activating."

"What should I think in specific?", you ask.

"It's not anything as straightforward as a command. It's about believing you can make it happen."

You raise a brow. "...Okay, here goes."

You close your eyes, and try to focus on the uniform.

Activate.

No, he did say it wasn't a command. What, then? You have to 'believe'? You're not entirely sure what that means, but you're willing to try. Believe.

Believe!

Why is Nonon laughing?

Suddenly, you feel your uniform shift and tremble, prompting you to open your eyes.

"D-did it work?"

Iori sighs. "Took you long enough."

The uniform's jacket zips itself up, and tightens to a point where it's almost skin-tight, with the pants following suit. Shoes, too? The threads move around audibly, forming gloves on

your hands, and some sort of faceguard on your jaw.

You blink, staring at your hands. "This is crazy."

"That is what I call a uniform's 'regalia'." Iori steps forward, inspecting your transformed outfit. "It's still a very early model, so it's not too different visually, but it does grant you the intended boost."

"Yeah, I feel really... light. In a good way." You bend your legs a few times, and jump for practice. It's almost like you're on a trampoline.

"That's the idea. I designed your uniform to focus on strength and agility."

"...Strength, huh?" You smirk, and approach the heavy crate. "Let's find out."

Expecting a lot of resistance from the box, you assume a suitable position, and get a good grip. To your surprise, as well as everyone else's, the massive weight feels about as heavy as Nonon to you.

Iori blinks a lot more than necessary. "...W-well, that exceeds my expectations."

You grin, and set the crate down. "Oh, so you can say something positive."

His expression immediately turns sour again. "I'll need to run a few more tests. Who wants to try next?"

The day has finally come. You adjust your jacket, checking for the last time that there are no visible wrinkles. You settled on a red dress shirt to wear with your uniform, which goes nicely with the black, as well as your red streak.

"Guess we're as ready as we can get."

Satsuki eyes you up and down, smiling. "You look good."

"Right back at you, prez." You peck her cheek, lingering near her for a moment. "I'm no match for you."

She blushes ever so slightly. "...Maybe you should hold off on such a verdict until you've seen this. Soroi, bring Ryuuko my regalia, please."

He immediately peeks inside the room to bow. "At once, milady."

"Regalia?" Didn't she say she isn't wearing any Life Fibers?

She merely smiles, and waits for Soroi. Soon enough, he returns, carrying what appears to be a large coat and hat.

"I will wear those for special occasions, such as today.", Satsuki explains. "I ask you to hold onto them until the ceremony begins."

"Sure."

You accept the regalia from Soroi. The coat is quite heavy, and seems to be tailored to go with Satsuki's new uniform. The hat brings a captain's cap to mind, bearing the Honnouji Academy insignia on the front, though it's somewhat more ornate than you would normally expect. They are different from all the other uniforms you've seen Iori make so far, lacking any spikes or star patterns, but the design clearly exists to show the one wearing those calls the shots. You can hardly wait to see how it looks on Satsuki.

While the tower's central room is silent and devoid of activity, a quick glance through a window assures you that it's in fact the school's busiest day yet. Students in different uniforms are frantically running around the courtyard, ordered around by Gamagoori and Nonon. Inumuta seems to be tinkering with something next to the podium prepared specifically for the occasion. Sanageyama is nowhere to be seen, but you can guess he's still busy preparing the main gym. Class starts today, after all.

"Quite busy out there.", you remark.

Satsuki approaches the window. "Indeed. And it will only get busier from here."

"We going down there, or...?"

"Not yet. First, to the helipad." She throws one more glance toward the commotion outside, and turns around. "Ragyou will be here any minute now."

You nod, and follow her lead. Looks like you'll finally get to meet your enemy. The woman who hurt Satsuki, and took her family away from her. Her mother. She will pay for all this... but in due time. Right now, the best you can do is be there for Satsuki. If your presence comforts her by even the tiniest bit, it's a job well done.

The helipad is expectedly windy, and empty. However, in the distance, you can already see a helicopter heading this way. The two of you silently wait for the aircraft to touch down

"Just... be very careful, Ryuuko.", Satsuki says.

You gulp. "...I know."

The machine touches down, a large, black chopper. Seems to be repurposed from a military aircraft, with the weapons removed... or concealed. The passenger door opens, and a person steps out. The sight is enough - no introduction necessary.

You hate to admit it, but you can now see which side of the family Satsuki got her perfect looks from. For a woman in her forties, Ragyou is astoundingly beautiful. It's far from the same kind of beauty as Satsuki's, though. There is something deeply unnatural about the way

she looks, and it's definitely not botox. Burning red eyes, silver hair, porcelain complexion – those traits bring albinism to mind, but you know that can't be it. After all, the rainbow glimmer that seems to emanate from her hair can't be natural. Something made her look this way. Life Fibers.

As previously instructed, you take a deep bow, waiting for her to get closer. In the corner of your eye, you notice somebody else came here with Ragyou. A pencil-pusher, judging by her more formal outfit.

"Mother. I'm glad you could make it." Satsuki's voice sounds perfectly neutral, though you know just how much effort she's putting in to keep it that way.

"Oh, I wouldn't miss this for the world, Satsuki." Ragyou's apparent nonchalance only serves to put you even more on edge. "And this must be Matoi Ryuuko?"

"It's an honor to finally meet you, ma'am.", you recite without looking up.

"Let's not get overly formal.", she says. "Straighten out, I want to get a better look at you."

As you oblige the request, you are met with a view of her nearly exposed chest. She's imposingly tall, and would be even without the stilettos. You hurriedly adjust your gaze, fixing it on hers.

"Hm." Taking you completely off-guard, she runs your red streak through her fingers. "...It's just hair?"

You can't help but flinch a bit. "M-ma'am?" Hopefully she won't be offended.

"Oh, it's nothing." She directs her attention to Satsuki. "Care to show me around, then?"

"...Certainly."

Satsuki leads Ragyou inside the tower, where she shows her the Student Council office, and the rest of the school through the windows. All the while, the assistant silently follows, occasionally nervously glancing at her tablet. Keeping an eye on the schedule?

"I can see the funds I've entrusted you with did not go to waste. Good work on that, Satsuki."

"Thank you, mother."

"Now, before we start, there is one more matter... Matoi Ryuuko." She looks at you once again. "You are aware of the nature of your father's work, correct?"

You stop yourself from raising a brow. Where did that come from? "...I know that he's a scientist, but nothing more than that, ma'am."

"Is that so? What about you, Satsuki? Has the intelligence reached you yet?" This sounds worrying.

Satsuki slowly shakes her head. "No."

Ragyou takes a few steps past the two of you, clearly satisfied with being able to deliver this 'intelligence'.

"Matoi Isshin has been covering his tracks quite well so far, but he has recently become a sizable blip on my radar. As it turns out, he is an independent Life Fiber researcher. And, to make things more interesting..." She faces you again. "He intends to use his research against us."

"M-my dad... opposes REVOCS?" The words come out on their own.

"The information I've received suggests so. He's even managed to gather some followers, apparently. Such nonsense.", Ragyou scoffs. "However... I hope you understand why this puts you in a difficult situation, Matoi Ryuuko."

You flash a glance at Satsuki, and gulp as quietly as you can. "I do. He is my father."

"Then, let me ask you again: are you aware of the nature of your father's work?"

That one you can answer truthfully. "Only because you told me about it, ma'am. I was very young when I last saw him, and he never said anything in the matter."

"And knowing that, what will you do?"

"My duty, ma'am. That is, remain here, and continue to serve your daughter. Personal ties don't come into it." That's at least partially true.

"So I would hope. And what do you think, Satsuki?" Ragyou looks at her. "Anything to add?"

Satsuki nods. "That I vouch for my Vice-President. She has completed every task I've given her thus far with utmost efficiency and reliability. I have no reasons to deem her familial connections a risk."

Ragyou clasps her hands for a moment. "That's settled, then."

What he said was the truth, after all. He did send you to that boarding school to keep you safe. A Life Fiber researcher... what is he planning to do? Wait...

That shirt. Your favorite, prized shirt you wore as a child. With gleaming red threads. That burst of strength when it got torn... it wasn't just your anger.

It was Life Fibers.

"Dear me, her father's betrayal shocked the poor girl." Ragyou's disgustingly saccharine tone brings you back to the now. You'll have to think about this at length later. You've got other things to focus on right now.

"...I'm fine, ma'am. It's just not something you hear every day.", you answer, though it seems she's lost interest by now.

"Inumuta, is everything prepared?", Satsuki speaks into her earpiece.

"We're good to go, Lady Satsuki. Whenever you're ready."

"Good. We'll start in a moment." She looks at Ragyou. "Mother?"

"No, no, go ahead, dear." Ragyou waves her hand dismissively. "This is your project, you should have the honor. I can throw in a word or two afterwards."

"I see."

Satsuki approaches the door to the balcony and glances behind her, which you take as a cue to approach her with her regalia. She raises her arms to the sides, allowing you to slide the sleeves on. Finally, she turns to face you, as you offer her the cap with a slight bow.

"Let's go, Matoi." It feels odd to hear her address you like that, but appearances are appearances.

"Yes, Lady Satsuki."

The outside is obviously windy at this altitude. As the two of you approach the edge, you're not sure what's more unnerving – the distance from the ground, or the huge crowd gathered there. Squinting, you spy the rest of the Student Council on an elevated podium in front of the main building.

With a loud clack of her heel and Bakuzan's scabbard, Satsuki stops at the very front of the catwalk. You take a knee some distance behind her, and quietly observe.

"Students of Honnouji Academy!"

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